

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## Reading

### Book Section

How to cite:

Colclough, Stephen and Vincent, David (2009). Reading. In: McKitterick, David ed. The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain Vol. VI. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 281–323.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2009 Cambridge University Press

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://www.cambridge.org/gb/knowledge/isbn/item1173904/The%20Cambridge%20History%20of%20the%20Book%20in%20B>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

# Reading

Stephen Colclough and David Vincent

## 1) The Meaning of Reading

During the last two decades the idea that readers invest printed objects with their own expectations and actively construct meaning, rather than finding it already inscribed in the text, has transformed the way in which we think about the history of reading. It is no longer enough to document what was being produced in the past; we now also need to discover how these objects were consumed. As Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier have argued, however, the reader is never entirely free to make meaning. Reading is always constrained by the protocols of reading embedded within texts, as well as by modes of access or communication, such as oral recitation. It is a skill that is taught and during this training the student also learns a set of meanings that it is legitimate to ascribe to certain texts, or to the act of reading itself, within his or her reading community. They conclude that, despite the appearance of an increasingly common culture throughout Europe by the end of the nineteenth century, in part due to the intervention of the nation state in the teaching process, there was in fact ‘an extreme diversity in both reading practices and markets for the book (or newspaper)’ throughout this period.<sup>1</sup>

Recent studies of reading have gone some way to unearthing the range of practices used by readers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Much of this work has concentrated upon the discourse of reading that helped to discipline or legitimate what readers did with texts. Kate Flint’s *The Woman Reader 1837-1914*, for example, looks at the ‘wide range of contexts in which “the woman reader” was constructed as a discrete topic’, including advice manuals, periodicals, ‘paintings, photographs and graphic art’, in order to suggest that women’s reading was often over-determined by this discourse.<sup>2</sup> Subsequent work on the iconography of the woman reader has teased out some of its contradictions by showing that reading purely for pleasure was not

---

<sup>1</sup> Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, ‘Introduction’ in *A History of Reading in the West*, ed. by Cavallo and Chartier (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), pp.33-36.

<sup>2</sup> Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.4.

always represented negatively.<sup>3</sup> Flint's study is particularly important, however, because it draws on a number of sources for the 'evidence of actual reading activity', including autobiographies, which show that women often espoused 'practices or preferences' directly opposed to those offered by the discourse of the 'woman reader'.<sup>4</sup> Many other historians of reading have used similar sources to reconstruct the practices of what are sometimes called 'real' readers. Both David Vincent and Jonathan Rose have explored working-class reading by placing the autobiographies produced by an unusually articulate elite sector of this class in the context of other writings, such as statistical surveys and library records, which present a broader picture of popular reading practices.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, H.J. Jackson's *Marginalia* (2001) looks at marginal comments and other forms of annotation created by real readers between 1700 and the late twentieth century, and James A. Secord has combined the study of manuscript diaries and journals with annotated books and representations of reading in order to reconstruct the reception of one book, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), by a diverse group of readers. Secord's study suggests that during the 1840s the same text could be read in a diversity of different ways, from the rapid skimming of fashionable readers familiarising themselves with a book that was already the subject of conversation, through to the detailed making of notes in the margin performed by a professional reader preparing a review.<sup>6</sup>

Many of these studies acknowledge that they may not be dealing with anything more than a 'randomly surviving, and perhaps highly unrepresentative, sample of the far larger total of acts of reception', which were never articulated.<sup>7</sup> This concern with the 'typicality' of the surviving records of individual readers has led some historians to concentrate upon the practices shared by groups of readers within specific reading communities. There are, for example, several recent studies of the correspondence

---

<sup>3</sup> See many of the essays in *Reading Women: Literary Figures and Cultural Icons from the Victorian Age to the Present*, ed. by Janet Badia and Jennifer Phegley (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), especially Jennifer Phegley, 'Images of Women Readers in Victorian Family Literary Magazines', pp.105-28.

<sup>4</sup> Flint, *Woman Reader*, p.14.

<sup>5</sup> David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge, and Freedom: a Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography* (London: Methuen, 1982); Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> H.J. Jackson, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (New Haven: Yale, 2001); James A. Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.5.

columns and letters pages of popular magazines and newspapers that suggest a uniform set of responses, but as Lynne Warren has noted, such columns were controlled by the publisher who wished to construct something between an ideal reader and a corporate identity for a product that needed real readers to feel as though they had some control over the text.<sup>8</sup> Those readers who wrote in may well have been just as unorthodox as those who produced autobiographies or kept detailed reading diaries. The sheer variety of practices unearthed so far by these studies suggests something of the essential inventiveness of the reader during the period 1830-1914, but some common patterns are discernable, including the widespread continuance of reading aloud as a social practice. Although it is clear that autobiographical materials tend to provide the greatest insight into how texts were actually put to use throughout this period they need to be examined in the context of, and compared with other sources, including representations of reading.

For the purposes of this chapter we have combined an investigation of the quantitative evidence of reading skills compiled by the state during a period in which mass literacy was encouraged as a sign of social cohesion, with autobiographical sources which give some sense of how these skills were deployed to meet various individual and communal needs. It is, of course, impossible to map all of the various reading communities, from religious groups through to professional reviewers, that existed during this period and we have not attempted to do so. Their histories are no doubt better suited to individual case studies. Although we offer some insights into the methods deployed by professional readers, such as authors and academics, our main concern here is with the so-called ‘common reader’ of the middle and lower classes. The chapter addresses how readers were made, or made themselves, in the first era of mass literacy. It then examines four ways in which the skills of decoding print were put into practice: in the home, in public places, by listening and by the use of writing to make sense of reading.

---

<sup>8</sup> Lynne Warren, ‘“Women in Conference”: Reading the Correspondence Columns in *Woman*, 1890-1910, in *Nineteenth-century Media and the Construction of Identities*, ed. by Laurel Brake et al (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), pp.122-33. For a discussion of other sources, see Teresa Gerrard, ‘New Methods in the History of Reading: “Answers to Correspondents” in *the Family Herald*, 1860-1900’, *Publishing History*, 43 (1998), pp.52-69.

## **2) Making Readers**

In 1858 Dickens' protégé Wilkie Collins contributed an article to *Household Words* which claimed the discovery of a new continent which lay beyond the boundaries of the known literary world. 'Do the subscribers to this journal', he asked, 'the customers at the eminent publishing-houses, the members of book-clubs and circulating libraries, and the purchasers and borrowers of newspapers and reviews, compose altogether the great bulk of the reading public of England? There was a time when, if anyone had put this question to me, I, for one, should certainly have answered, Yes. I know better now. I know that the public just now mentioned, viewed as an audience for literature, is nothing more than a minority.'<sup>9</sup> Collins had found his new land by the simple expedient of walking into the communities of the labouring poor and looking at the print that was on sale. He was offered the most basic forms of literature, not books or serials but small quarto publications consisting 'merely of a few unbound pages; each one of them had a picture on the upper half of the front leaf, and a quantity of small print on the under.'<sup>10</sup> What impressed him most was their sheer ubiquity. 'There they were in every town, large or small. I saw them in fruit-shops, in oyster-shops, in lollypop-shops. Villages even - picturesque, strong-smelling villages - were not free from them.'<sup>11</sup> Their existence, Collins reckoned, reflected the presence of a hidden body of readers. The 'enormous outlawed majority ... the lost literary tribes' constituted 'a reading public of three millions which lies right out of the pale of literary civilisation.'<sup>12</sup>

Collins' enquiry was more thorough than even his great mentor had ever undertaken, but it remained impressionistic. It is possible that his achievement lay in asking the question rather than finding the answer. To establish whether he had indeed exposed a revolution in reading practices it is necessary to turn first of all to the quantitative evidence that the state had for two decades been compiling on the communication skills of the population at large. The Victorians invented literacy as a concept rather than a practice (although the word itself had to wait until 1893 before its first recorded use in England). The capacity to decode texts was separated from other techniques of communication and other skills for living and subjected to enquiry and debate. The

---

<sup>9</sup> Wilkie Collins, 'The Unknown Public', *Household Words*, vol.18, no.439 (August 27, 1858), p.217.

<sup>10</sup> Collins, 'Unknown Public', p.217.

<sup>11</sup> Collins, 'Unknown Public', p.217

<sup>12</sup> Collins, 'Unknown Public', p.218.

marriage registers which were compiled on a more systematic basis from 1837 onwards permitted the calculation of the numbers of brides and grooms completing the form with a signature or a mark. A private attainment became a public fact. The ability to count reflected the increased self-confidence and infrastructural capacity of the Reform Act State. The returns were seen as a measure both of the task it had accepted of creating a reading a public, and of the return on its increasing investment in elementary schooling following the first subsidy in 1833.

When the early returns are combined with the reconstitution of data from those pre-1837 registers where the parish had consistently recorded signatures,<sup>13</sup> the language of revolution is called into question. By the early nineteenth century England and Wales had become societies in which the capacity to decode print was a commonplace. Around sixty per cent of men and forty per cent of women could sign their names. This achievement was of long standing. The graph had been rising only very slowly since the 1750s. Three centuries after the invention of printing the demand for instruction in reading and writing and the means for supplying it had become widely disseminated. Nominal literacy was virtually universal across the middling and upper reaches of society and throughout the ranks of male artisans. Even amongst the lowest orders there was a solid tradition of attainment. In the first returns of the reformed marriage registers a fifth of miners and over a quarter of unskilled labourers could form a signature.<sup>14</sup> And whilst there were distinct spatial variations across England and Wales, with scores highest below a line from The Wash to the Severn Estuary, there were no blank spots on the map.<sup>15</sup> Every village, every urban neighbourhood possessed those who at least knew what writing was and how to imitate it. And through the presence of vernacular religious literature, and through the networks of chapmen fanning out from the urban warehouses,<sup>16</sup> everyone had some contact with the written word. If ever they had existed since the Reformation, the wholly oral communities were now merely a fantasy of the emerging folklore movement.

---

<sup>13</sup> Roger Schofield, 'Dimensions of illiteracy in England 1750-1850', in, Harvey Graff (ed.), *Literacy and Social Development in the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp.205, 207.

<sup>14</sup> David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture. England 1750-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 97.

<sup>15</sup> W.B. Stephens, *Education, Literacy and Society, 1830-1870. The geography of diversity in provincial England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), pp.20-14.

<sup>16</sup> Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories* ( London: Methuen, 1981), pp.219-57.

The official returns for the remainder of the period up to the First World War record a renewed climb from the late eighteenth-century plateau. Neither the rapid population growth nor the industrial revolution nor the creation of the world's first urban society could hold back the rise. Unskilled labourers caught up with the skilled, brides with grooms (even outstripping them in many mid-century communities) until by 1914 virtually the whole of the marrying age population was completing the register with a signature. Britain, in common with its neighbours in North-West Europe, had achieved a nominally literate society.<sup>17</sup> The rapidly ascending graph appeared to reflect the increased intervention by the state in the provision of literacy, from the initial subsidies to the beginning of an inspected curriculum in the 1840s, the introduction of the Revised Code in 1862 with its foregrounding of instruction in the three Rs, the creation of a nationwide system of elementary schooling in 1870 and the imposition of compulsory attendance in 1880. In an era that was still inventing quantitative social analysis the literacy tables were beacons of consistent, objective measurement. Other demographic data was exposed to under-recording, criminal statistics, with which literacy was often linked, were plagued with problems of categorisation and mis-reporting. Yet soon after the first tables were published critics began to point out that it was not clear if they accurately reflected possession of the skills, or the capacity to use them, or, most importantly their actual application. At best, as W.B. Hodgson argued in 1867, the skills of reading and writing were no more than 'tools for gaining knowledge; they are not crop, but plough and harrow.'<sup>18</sup> The journey from the signature to the active engagement with the written word was neither predictable nor straightforward.

Subsequent analysis of marriage registers and other related data in Britain and elsewhere would suggest that there is some ground beneath our feet. Where it has been possible in the European countries now compiling literacy scores to compare marriage registers with other evidence such as census enquiries and conscript records,

---

<sup>17</sup> David Vincent, *The Rise of Mass Literacy. Reading and Writing in Modern Europe*. (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), pp.9-10.

<sup>18</sup> W.B. Hodgson, 'Exaggerated Estimates of Reading and Writing', *Transactions of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Sciences* (1867), p.398.

a consistent pattern of change emerges.<sup>19</sup> A close examination of the distribution of marks and signatures left in the English registers by the four parties to the marriage ceremony – bride, groom and two often related witnesses – gives little support to the contemporary suspicion that literate brides or grooms were entering marks in order not to embarrass less educated partners.<sup>20</sup> The signatures themselves are for the most part sufficiently fluent to suggest that the writers had held a pen before and were not merely copying a couple of words set out in front of them. Some kind of communication skill was being measured and its possession was undergoing a significant change over time.

The nature of that skill and its connection to the practice of reading was conditioned by the way it was taught. Prior to the arrival of the inspected curriculum, instruction was a striking combination of the informal and the abstract. For most boys and almost all girls such instruction as took place was fitted around the rhythms and requirements of the family economy. A parent or an elder sibling who had made some progress with their letters might pass on their knowledge in the evenings or in the interstices of the working week. If there was any spare cash in the family economy, a widow looking for a source of income or a working man seeking an escape from manual labour might be paid for intermittent instruction. By the eighteenth century the village schoolteacher was already a recognised occupation, but it was rarely better paid than the labouring men whose pence were contributed to teach their children. Even when the local vicar took lessons or employed a master, attendance was at the discretion of parents who had other and often more pressing priorities.<sup>21</sup> There was no set age of commencement of learning, and well before their teens those children who had been exposed to instruction drifted off into full-time labour or domestic duties. Neither was there a dominant physical context, with those children possessed of determined parents passing through various kinds of domestic and formal instruction, even in relatively small rural communities.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> See in particular, Francois Furet and Jacques Ozouf, *Reading and Writing. Literacy in France from Calvin to Jules Ferry* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp.14-17.

<sup>20</sup> Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, Appendix B.

<sup>21</sup> On parental attitudes to schooling see Philip Gardner, *The Lost Elementary Schools of Victorian England* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), pp.91-100.

<sup>22</sup> Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, pp. 66-72.

If there was no single structure of teaching, there was an accepted method. Since the invention of printing, all children exposed to formal instruction encountered the printed word in the same manner.<sup>23</sup> They were presented with the alphabet, then a list of disconnected syllables.<sup>24</sup> Once these were mastered the pupil was required to combine them into words of increasing length and complexity. By the eighteenth century a flourishing industry in cheap primers had emerged, with the market leaders claiming several hundred 'editions' over many decades.<sup>25</sup> The variation between them was confined to the elaboration of the lists of words, with the most complex taking the pupils from monosyllables to seven-syllable tongue twisters accompanied by compilations of the most obscure and complex Biblical names. Writing, where it was attempted, was essentially a form of imitation, copying letters and complete words set before the learner. In this sense, there was a marked contrast between the skills of oral and written communication. Whereas the child learned to speak as it needed to, without conscious lessons or gradations of achievement, and put its capacity to immediate use, reading and writing began with units of sound that had no meaning in themselves, and the process of combination always appeared a distinct and artificial attainment, with no inherent relevance to sense and expression.

The adoption by the Anglican and Nonconformist churches of the ambition of mass elementary education in the early decades of the nineteenth century, followed by the introduction in 1841 of systematic state inspection of all schools receiving public funding, had the effect of accentuating the abstract at the expense of the informal.<sup>26</sup> In domestic instruction, in the dame and private day schools and the parish schools, the artifice of the syllabic method had been softened by the universal practice of individual instruction. Even in a well-attended parish school each pupil would be taught by being called to the master to receive a few minutes of personal attention,

---

<sup>23</sup> Ian Michael, *The Teaching of English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Harvey J. Graff, *The Legacies of Literacy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p.72.

<sup>24</sup> Ian Michael, *Early Textbooks of English* (Reading: Colloquium on Textbooks, Schools and Society, 1993), p.2; David Vincent, 'Reading Made Strange: context and method in becoming literate in eighteenth and nineteenth-century England' in, *Silences and Images. The Social History of the Classroom*, ed. Ian Grosvenor, Martin Lawn and Kate Rousmaniere (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), pp.180-5.

<sup>25</sup> For instance, T. Dyche *Guide to the English Tongue* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London, 1710); W. Markham, *An Introduction to Spelling and Reading English* (5<sup>th</sup> ed., London, 1738); T. Dilworth, *A New Guide to the English Tongue* (London, 1840).

<sup>26</sup> On the new system of inspection see Neil J. Smelser, *Social Paralysis and Social Change. British Working Class Education in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp.91-2.

spending the rest of the day left to its own devices with a primer or a piece of chalk. Faced with the need to achieve economies of scale and measurable outcomes, and attracted by the experiments in systematic management being pioneered in factories and prisons, an increasingly self-conscious teaching profession began to develop a new pedagogy based on the simultaneous instruction of an entire class.<sup>27</sup> A single master, operating with a team of ‘monitors’ – older children who had made some progress in the curriculum – might hope to teach classes of sixty or seventy pupils, every one of whom would be fully engaged in the task of learning their letters throughout the fixed hours and days of the school year.

The centuries-old syllabic method was perfectly suited to this ordered universe. It provided the illusion of structure and progress. The pupil could proceed from level to level by moving from alphabet to syllables to escalating combinations.<sup>28</sup> The hierarchy of classes could reflect the complexity of the words that were being learned.<sup>29</sup> More discursive forms of instructional literature such as anthologies of prose and poetry which had begun to appear in the market place in the late eighteenth-century,<sup>30</sup> were pushed back to the margins by a new generation of school manuals combining traditional methods with new ambitions. Literacy became, in modern parlance, the first public-sector performance measurement, indicating the effectiveness of the teacher, the output of the school and when aggregated in the inspectors’ reports and marriage-register tables, the consequences of state investment. And whilst the churches had seen in the growing level of spending on elementary schooling a powerful means of extending their reach into the lives and communities of the labouring poor, they found themselves under increasing pressure to subordinate their essentially unquantifiable spiritual instruction in favour of capacities which

---

<sup>27</sup> K. Jones and K. Williamson, ‘The Birth of the Schoolroom’, *Ideology and Consciousness*, vol.6 (1979), pp.73-8.

<sup>28</sup> See for instance *Manual for the System of Primary Instruction, Pursued in the Model Schools of the B.F.S.S.* (London, 1831); W.M’Cleod, *A First Reading Book for the Use of Families and Schools* (London, 1848); J.M. M’Culloch, *A First Reading Book for the Use of Schools* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1837).

<sup>29</sup> M. Matthews, *Teaching to Read, Historically Considered* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966),pp.19-74.

<sup>30</sup> W.J. Frank Davies, *Teaching Reading in Early England* (London: Pitman, 1973),p.151.

could be counted, culminating in the Revised Code of 1862 which restricted government funding to examined outcomes in reading, writing and arithmetic.<sup>31</sup>

Attainment in literacy was a means of managing the emerging profession of the formally trained elementary school teacher. At the same time the creation of the normal schools together with the annual school inspectors' reports and the intermittent Parliamentary enquiries into the use of state funding created an arena for innovation in the pedagogy of reading and writing. By the 1850s a reaction was setting in against the increasingly mechanical nature of the class-based syllabic system. The 'Look and Say' method began to be advocated on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>32</sup> Instead of constructing words and sentences in the orderly fashion of factory production, the pupil was to encounter complete words and meaningful sentences as soon as it had mastered the alphabet. Guesswork was permitted and the learner was encouraged to create links between competence in oral skills and growing confidence in reading. The standards of the Revised Code were modified by use and began to incorporate passages of prose and poetry extracted from works of approved authors. J.S. Laurie's *Graduated Series of Reading Lesson Books* of 1866 introduced the handful of pupils who reached Standard V to Macaulay, Spenser, Milton and Byron.<sup>33</sup> In a parallel shift writing ceased merely to be copying. In the new Code of 1871 what was termed 'composition' was introduced for the top Standard VI.<sup>34</sup> In practice this meant little more than producing simple specimen letters but it was at least a token recognition that the pen could be a means of independent self-expression.

It is difficult to determine how far the new thinking displaced the old, particularly for the mass of pupils who never progressed beyond the lower grades. In 1867 W.B. Hodgson discovered that in the official curriculum:

---

<sup>31</sup> A.J. Marcham, 'The Revised Code of Education 1862: Reinterpretations and Misinterpretations', *History of Education*, vol.10, no.2 (1981), pp.87-90.

<sup>32</sup> *Minutes of the Committee of Council on Education, 1851-2* (London, 1852), vol. II, p. 48; Alec Ellis, *History of Children's Reading and Literature* (Oxford; Pergamon Press, 1968), pp. 51-53.

<sup>33</sup> J.S. Laurie, *Laurie's Graduated Series of Reading Lesson Books* (London, 1866). See also, E.T. Stevens and Rev. C. Hole, *The Grade Lesson Books in Six Standards* (London, 1871). The developments are discussed in, Alec Ellis, *Books in Victorian Elementary Schools* (London: Library Association, 1971), pp.21-32.

<sup>34</sup> Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, p.89.

The letters are taught by their names, not by their sounds, in the arbitrary order of the alphabet, instead of the natural order of the organs by which they were pronounced. Spelling is still taught by means of columns of long, hard, unconnected words, selected for their very difficulty and rarity, to be learned by rote, or, as is said with unconscious irony, 'by heart'.<sup>35</sup>

The changes in the third quarter of the nineteenth century constituted not a gradual evolution away from primitive times but rather the commencement of the wars over method which continue to this day. Syllabic or, in its later manifestation, phonetic instruction has waned and waxed as the required approach of the inspected curriculum and teacher. What has remained constant in the official mind is the assumption that method itself is critical. Despite research that suggests that a range of contextual factors including the availability of reading matter in the home, the scale of parental involvement, the quality of the physical facilities of the school, and the enthusiasm of the teacher are integral to the outcome of the early engagement with formal communication skills,<sup>36</sup> the search has continued for the magic methodological bullet that will guarantee that the ever-increasing cost of public investment in schooling will generate a continuing improvement in the graph of literacy. In the era of the invention of the state-funded and policed classroom, method served as a key signifier of quality. Traditional parish schools, and more so privately run day and dame schools, and yet more so domestic instruction, stood condemned by the absence of a formally embodied system of teaching.

Historians of education have only recently begun to pay attention to the scale and consequence of unofficial instruction in literacy in the nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup> This is in part because the official record, much the most accessible and supposedly reliable evidence about past practice, refers to non-standard provision only to condemn it. The educational reformers of the period were fired by the twin ambitions of getting the rapidly increasing cohorts of young children off the streets and into the classroom, and replacing amateur by professional instruction. Compulsory attendance when it

---

<sup>35</sup> Hodgson, 'Exaggerated Estimates', p. 400.

<sup>36</sup> Margaret Meek, 'Literacy: redescribing reading' in, K. Kimberley, M. Meek and J. Miller, *New Readings. Contributions to an Understanding of Literacy* (London: A. & C. Black), pp226-32.

<sup>37</sup> The first attempt to challenge the orthodoxy was Gardner, *Lost Elementary Schools*.

was introduced in 1880 was as much aimed at the unrecognised instructor as it was at the absent pupil. A critical reworking of official statistics together with a search for alternative sources of evidence, particularly working-class autobiography, have helped to place back on the literacy stage the boys and girls teaching themselves from fragments of print found in the house, the street or the church pew, the mothers reading with their children in the evenings, the fathers teaching sons with a book propped on their loom, the older siblings passing on their scant knowledge, the Sunday School teachers taking a day out of their working week to lead classes, the widows eking a pittance by taking a few small children into their living room, the broken-down labourers looking for a less physically demanding alternative to physical toil, the groups of working men forming mutual improvement societies to translate their limited childhood skills into the capacity to read and take meaning from extended prose. Taken together the labours of these figuratively anonymous instructors and self-instructors were responsible for the attainment of over sixty per cent nominal literacy rates before the state spent a penny on teaching reading and writing, and played a significant role in the final drive to mass literacy. Even where the instruction did take place in the inspected classroom, the child's presence was for most of the period of rapid growth dependent on the decision of the parents to meet the cost of clothing and, where charged, school fees, and sacrifice the value of the son in the economy or the daughter as a child minder. If a notional fifteen years is added to cover the period between leaving school to appearing in the marriage registers, only five per cent of the task of achieving a nominally literate society remained by the time the state plucked up its courage to start penalising parents who refused to send their children for inspected lessons in reading and writing.<sup>38</sup>

The rediscovery of the unofficial instructor challenges the official statistical record but cannot replace it. Almost all the questions that might legitimately be asked about the range and quality of reading skills at any point in the nineteenth century cannot be answered with any kind of precision. The only direct measure of the use of literacy in the period are for writing in the returns made by the Post Office following the introduction of the Penny Post in 1840,<sup>39</sup> supplemented by the international data

---

<sup>38</sup> Anne Digby and Peter Searby, *Children, School and Society in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: MacMillan, 1981), p.4.

<sup>39</sup> M. Daunton, *Royal Mail* (London: Athlone, 1985), pp.8-11.

generated by the Universal Postal Union after 1875. These suggest that except in times of domestic emergency the mass of the population did not take up their pens to communicate with each other until the introduction of the picture postcard at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>40</sup> We know that in Britain, unlike France, reading and writing tended to be taught concurrently rather than consecutively, and therefore marriage register signatures may indicate some kind of twin achievement. Half a century ago R. K. Webb made a pioneering calculation that those signing their name probably were able to make some attempt at reading, and between a half and two thirds of them could actually use a pen for some task other than writing their names.<sup>41</sup> His estimate has remained the best guess if only because it is impossible to construct a systematic, nation-wide quantitative measure to improve it. On this basis, Wilkie Collins' estimate of an English reading public of around three million in the middle of the nineteenth century may not be far from the truth.

The task of making readers in the nineteenth century had the most profound impact on the teachers. The transformative innovations were in the structures created to sustain a new category of state activity and to train and manage a new type of public employee. Together with prisons and the Poor Law, elementary education was the site of the most radical growth of non-military spending in the nineteenth century, and the most far-reaching experiments in systems for control and monitoring. Compared with the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, where initiatives such as the literacy hour can be conceived and systematically imposed within months, the infrastructural power of the state remained weak. In the first phase of reform it seemed more practical to work through the voluntary church societies than attempt a parallel construction. Compulsory teaching of reading was not introduced until the great majority of parents had accepted the need to educate their children, and even so did not become fully effective, especially for girls, for several decades. Blueprints for mass instruction were drawn up in most Western European states during or soon after the French Revolution but took most of the succeeding century to be

---

<sup>40</sup> [M.D. Hill], 'The Post Office', *Fraser's Magazine*, vol. LXVI (1862), pp.330-1; *Twenty-seventh Annual Report of the Postmaster General* (1881), p.11; *Thirty-seventh Annual Report of the Postmaster General* (1891), p.17; *Forty-seventh Annual Report of the Postmaster General* (1901), p.25; H. Robinson, *Britain's Post Office* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 221; Frank Staff, *The Picture Postcard and its Origins* (London: Lutterworth, 1966), pp.7-91.

<sup>41</sup> R. K. Webb, 'Working-Class Readers in Early Victorian England', *English Historical Review*, vol. 65 (1950), p.350.

implemented. In England, the aspiration for a schooled society was comprehensively set out in the failed Brougham Education Bill of 1820.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, over time a handful of modernising states accepted and fulfilled a responsibility to introduce all children to the elements of formal communication. And in place of the untrained instructor, engaging in teaching concurrently with other part-time manual occupations, or moving in and out of schooling according to the fluctuating demands of the seasonal economy and the inconsistent capacity of parents to find surplus pence for an optional investment in their children, there emerged the trained career professional, dedicating a working life to the single task of creating a mass reading public.

For the new readers the consequences were less profound. Within the broad curriculum of a child's upbringing, even in the agricultural sector, literacy was at best one of a range of skills for living and working which might be acquired and by no means the most difficult or time-consuming. For a skilled artisan, mastering the alphabet took its place amongst a variety of early childhood tasks undertaken in preparation for the real course of learning which did not commence until apprenticeship at the age of fourteen. As James Brooks pointed out with respect to Russia, whilst governments attached increasing importance to the issue, 'it was also a skill the children could acquire quickly during a couple of winters of formal or informal schooling.'<sup>43</sup> In Britain, the seasonal interludes were gradually extended to a block of childhood, with entry around five or six and a leaving age imposed at ten in 1880, eleven in 1893 and twelve in 1899.<sup>44</sup> Even so, the great majority of children came nowhere near the encounters with extended prose at the summit of the inspected curriculum. There were, for instance, just over three and a half million children in at school in the early years of compulsion. Of these, just under half entered and passed one of the first four standards in reading. At the top, only one in fifty achieved the sixth standard where they demonstrated an ability to 'read a passage from one of Shakespeare's historical plays, or from some other standard author, or from a history

---

<sup>42</sup> Smelser, *Social Paralysis and Social Change*, pp.73-4.

<sup>43</sup> Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p.xiv.

<sup>44</sup> Hugh Cunningham, *The Invention of Childhood* (London: BBC Books, 2006), pp.172-3.

of England.’<sup>45</sup> When a new seventh standard was introduced in 1885, it was attempted by a tiny elite of one in six hundred pupils.<sup>46</sup>

The one clear change was a decline in absolute illiteracy, and with it an erosion of the differentials which reflected the structural inequalities of society. Occupation remained the most consistent predictor of attainment in the nineteenth century, but its significance declined over time. For grooms who were unskilled labourers at marriage, a rate of 77% illiteracy in 1839 had fallen to 44% by 1874/9, 14% by 1894/9, and stood at 1% as the First World War broke out.<sup>47</sup> Brides did not generally enter an occupation in the registers, but if their fathers’ occupations are taken as a proxy, there is a parallel rate of decline, starting at 71% in 1839 and reaching 3% in 1914.<sup>48</sup> The gap between men and women, a feature of every modernising society, closed with greater speed. In 1750 brides lagged 20 points behind grooms, and were still 16 points back in the first returns of the reformed registration process. Thereafter they steadily caught up with their menfolk in the national aggregate figures. By the beginning of third quarter of the nineteenth century, they were only one or two points behind the grooms, and both partners in the marriage ceremonies reached nominal universal literacy virtually together. Recent scholarship has stressed that the experience of girls in official schooling was markedly different from that of boys in terms both of the vulnerability of their attendance to the demands of child-minding and the time spent in the classroom on the practical training necessary for their future role as domestic servants and housewives.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, learning to read and write in the elementary classroom was not intrinsically gendered. All pupils used the same textbooks and in terms of the prescribed standards were expected to reach the same level of attainment. In relation to the continuing differentials in every other aspect of their lives from birth to death, the early encounter with the printed word represented some kind of a haven of equal access. Indeed where circumstances were propitious, particularly in southern rural areas where boys were more often taken from the schoolroom to take part in the agricultural economy, the capacity to sign a marriage

---

<sup>45</sup> *Report of the Committee of Council on Education 1882-3* (London, 1883), pp.200-2.

<sup>46</sup> *Report of the Committee of Council on Education 1883-4* (London, 1884), pp.205, 214-5.

<sup>47</sup> Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, p. 97, Table 4.1.

<sup>48</sup> Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, p. 102, Table 4.3.

<sup>49</sup> Anna Davin, *Growing up Poor: Home, School and Street in London 1870-1914* (London, Rivers Oram Press, 1996), pp.116-73; June Purvis, *Hard Lessons: The Lives and Education of Working-Class Women in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), pp. 80-93.

register became a rare example of women out-performing men. As early as 1864 brides were ahead of grooms in almost all counties south of a line from the Wash to Dorset. Although the differences were compressed as illiteracy disappeared, there were actually more literate brides than grooms in two out of three English counties in the period between 1900 and the outbreak of war.<sup>50</sup>

Labourers became more like landowners, women more like men, the countryside more like the city, and the north of England more like the south. Total illiteracy ceased to be a divisive factor across most of the basic social and demographic categories. The one area in which it grew was that of age. Although no systematic analysis has been undertaken for the eighteenth century, it is likely that the very slow movement in the literacy rates confined inequalities between the generations. As soon as the final drive towards mass literacy commenced, gaps opened up between parents and their children. Taking the period between 1839 and 1914 as a whole, the most literate cohort, those appearing in the registers between the ages of 25 and 29, was nearly 40 points more literate than the small group of widows and widowers reappearing in the registers in their sixties and beyond. At any point in the period those in their early twenties were around twenty points more literate than the next generation up in their late forties.<sup>51</sup>

The age differential had two consequences. The first was that in household after household, the pupil-teacher role was reversed. Children read to parents rather than the other way about. When the very rare official document was encountered, ironically most frequently in relation to the school bureaucracy, the adults had often to depend on their dependents to decipher it. The situation was analogous to the more compressed and dramatic effect of the contemporary IT revolution where the fifteen year-old is the modern master of communication and the fifty-year-old a supplicant apprentice. When the first of the new technologies arrived, the silent cinema, ‘a muddled Greek chorus of children’s voices rose from the benches’, recalled Robert Roberts, reading the captions for the parents who had taken them.<sup>52</sup> The second effect was further to qualify the apparent achievement of a literate society by 1914. Men

---

<sup>50</sup> Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, p. 25, Table 2.1.

<sup>51</sup> Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, pp. 26-7, Figs 2.2 and 2.3.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p.176.

and women exposed to more limited possibilities of formal education had occurred decades earlier lived on in the company of children and grandchildren with increasing opportunities. Because of the nature of the data set, with only small numbers of older brides and grooms appearing in the registers, it is difficult to be precise but it is likely that in the early years of the twentieth century, the moment at which illiteracy was nominally vanquished, at least one adult in ten still lacked a minimum command over the basic skills of reading and writing. Robert Roberts wrote of Edwardian Salford that ‘Among the lower class, a mass of illiterates, solid and sizeable, still remained.’<sup>53</sup> These were the old men and women still confined to oral communication that Richard Hoggart encountered in his childhood in interwar Leeds.<sup>54</sup>

The Victorians counted what they assumed to be reading and writing in order to pattern a society which threatened constantly to escape their comprehension. Their achievement allows us to gain some sense of the landscape of communication but it is important not to lose sight of the intrinsic disorder beneath the graphs of progress. The regime of inspection, examination and compulsion represented a far-sighted attempt to reduce inequalities of provision, but in the period before 1914 it had only a limited effect. From the child’s perspective, chance remained the reality. Statistical analysis has failed to find any regularity in whether older or younger children were more likely to be taught to read; so much depended on the unpredictable fluctuations on the family economy and the inconsistent availability of competent teachers. Autobiographical evidence reveals enormous variations in the experience of private day and dame schools, with establishments opening and closing without warning and individual teachers ranging from inspired, life-transforming amateurs to barely-literate drunks.<sup>55</sup> Most inspected schools remained deeply dependent on the character of an individual teacher faced for much of the period with impossibly optimistic expectations of how classes of sixty or more could be kept in order, let alone taught anything of lasting value. Method occupied the writers of textbooks and the heads of teacher-training institutions but for the children what mattered more was whether they had adequate clothing for what could be long walks along muddy lanes to the nearest school, whether they had eaten enough to concentrate on their lessons,

---

<sup>53</sup> Roberts, *Classic Slum*, p.177.

<sup>54</sup> Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958).

<sup>55</sup> Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, pp. 71-2.

and, above all, whether they had any opportunity to practice their barely grasped skills outside the classroom.

There is a natural temptation to place the acquisition of reading skills chronologically in front of their use but in the nineteenth century the reality is one of a complex interaction. In his *History of Reading*, Alberto Manguel writes that, ‘the methods by which we learn to read not only embody the conventions of our particular society regarding literacy – the channelling of information, the hierarchies of knowledge and power – they also determine and limit the ways in which our ability to read is put to use.’<sup>56</sup> In the specific circumstances of the drive to mass literacy in Britain, the reverse was equally true. Function was as much a cause as a consequence of the rising numbers of readers. The growth of official schooling followed the increase in demand from parents, and the outcome of the lessons depended on what their children thought reading meant and how far they could practice their new skills outside the school.

It can, for instance, be argued that by far the most effective primer for learning to read in the critical period when literacy levels began to take off was to be found on the streets rather than in the classroom.<sup>57</sup> If we take a typical product of the great entrepreneur of the penny broadside in the 1830s and 40s, James Catnach’s *Account of a Dreadful and Horrible Murder Committed by Mary Bell on the Body of her Mother*,<sup>58</sup> we find a text perfectly suited not only to the sanguine imagination of the young but also to their wide range of reading abilities. Those who had yet to master the alphabet could get some sense of the point of print by listening to the five, four-line verses in the broadside sung by the street vendor to a contemporary popular tune, or repeated by friends and neighbours. They could be led into the story, in which a daughter poisoned her mother’s gruel after she had disapproved of her lover, by the graphic woodcut at the head of the document.<sup>59</sup> Only those bereft not only of literacy but also of sight and hearing could fail to engage with the revolution in the production of popular literature which was now generating seven-figure print-runs of successful

---

<sup>56</sup> Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (London, Flamingo, 1997), p.67.

<sup>57</sup> Martha Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse* (London: Croom Helm, 1974), p.26.

<sup>58</sup> London, n.d. St. Bride’s Collection.

<sup>59</sup> Charles Hindley, *Curiosities of Cheap Literature* (London, 1871), p.ii; Charles Manby Smith, ‘Press of the Seven Dials’, in *The Little World of London* (London, 1857), p.261.

items. Those who had been encouraged to gain some fluency in reading could practice their skills on the accompanying 250-word narrative which contained within its compact frame a complete account of action, motive, and consequence. In their combination of print and illustration the broadsides followed in the footsteps of the eighteenth-century chapbooks which had always commenced with a pictorial summary of the story,<sup>60</sup> and as the single-side broadsides gave way to the more substantial penny dreadfuls, the visual introduction was maintained.<sup>61</sup> This was the world Wilkie Collins had discovered on his literary exploration, available everywhere at less than the cost of a pint of beer, demanding few skills but giving every encouragement to the development of those which had been picked up by some form of instruction.

### **3) Reading in the Home**

As fast as the inspected curriculum isolated reading as a distinct practice, so the market for popular leisure integrated the consumption of literature with that of other mass-produced products and entertainments. An early indication of the phenomenon which was to reach its apotheosis with Dickens was the phenomenon of Paul Pry. This started life not as a text but as a play, the popular hit on the London stage of 1825. It was so successful that within a few years it had appeared as in a host of forms. Some were further pirated dramas, but others exploited the growing genres of cheap print, with prose versions, juvenile editions and a sequence of periodicals exploiting themes of the play which continued to appear until the 1870s. At the same time the eponymous hero escaped into the aural and visual world. Song books were compiled loosely based on themes and characters from the play. Paul Pry could be found on pub signs in various parts of the country. Ships and horses were named after him. And the figure of Pry, complete with umbrella as portrayed by Lister in the first production, gained an iconic force in much the same way as the visually similar Mr. Pickwick a decade later. He quickly became a three-dimensional object with the Staffordshire, Rockingham, Derby and Worcester factories all producing figures of Pry by 1826.<sup>62</sup> In a fine example of the sheer fluidity of the textual and the visual in

---

<sup>60</sup> J. Ashton, *Chapbooks of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1882), p.vii.

<sup>61</sup> W. Roberts, 'Lloyd's Penny Bloods', *Book-collectors' Quarterly*, XVIII (1935), p.6; G. P. Haining, *The Penny Dreadful* (London, 1975), p.15.

<sup>62</sup> "Papers and Porcelains: Two recent Gift Collections", in [www.folger.edu/public/exhibit/PapersPorc/papers.htm](http://www.folger.edu/public/exhibit/PapersPorc/papers.htm), paragraphs 13-14.

this era, George Cruikshank first of all included Pry in his *Six vignettes illustrating phrenological propensities* in 1826,<sup>63</sup> and subsequently placed a porcelain figure of Pry on the mantelshelf of the workhouse parlour in an illustration for *Oliver Twist*.<sup>64</sup>

There was an intrinsically borderless quality to the consumption of print in the middle decades of the century, which reached its apotheosis in Dickens' public readings between 1857 and 1870 where large audiences consumed print without needing to read it at all.<sup>65</sup> It moved between the home and the street and the purpose-built place of entertainment. At the same time a range of demographic, commercial and political changes were beginning to disseminate the phenomenon of the domestic reader. During the phase between the Reform Bill Crisis of 1830-32 and the presentation of the third Chartist petition on 1848 when the apprehension of revolutionary violence was at its height, a number of enquiries were undertaken to establish just what kind of literature the mass of the population had in their homes. These revealed that at least a half in some cases more than three quarters of homes, rural as well as urban, had a book in the house, most frequently a Bible or prayer book. In Bristol, where rioters had burned down much of the town in 1831, 57 per of families possessed religious books. The figures were 85 per cent in the Black Country town of West Bromwich, 75 per cent in the seaport of Hull, and in the crowded parish of St. George's Hanover Square in London, 89 cent had a Bible, Testament or Prayer Book. In the Bedfordshire agricultural parish of Eversholt only twelve out of 209 families lacked a religious book of any sort.<sup>66</sup> This literature had been inherited rather than bought, and

---

<sup>63</sup> George Cruikshank, *Six vignettes illustrating phrenological propensities: hope, conscientiousness, veneration, cautiousness, benevolence, causality; illustrated by a dog anxious for scraps, a maid attempting a good price for her masters old clothes, an obese gourmand eyeing an enormous side of beef, a prim couple crossing a muddy road, a man being flogged, Liston acting the part of Paul Pry* ([London]. 1826). On Cruikshank's satire of phrenology, see, Robert L. Patten, *George Cruikshank's Life, Times, and Art, vol. 1, 1792-1835* (London: Lutterworth, 1992), pp. 285-90.

<sup>64</sup> Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (London: Penguin, 1985), p.220. On Cruikshank's placing of Paul Pry in the Picture, see, D. Paroissien, *The Companion to Oliver Twist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), Appendix 2. See Figure 2.

<sup>65</sup> On Dickens and his readers see, David Vincent, 'Dickens's reading public', in John Bowen and Robert L. Patten (eds.), *Palgrave Advances in Charles Dickens Studies* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 176-97. See also below [p.40].

<sup>66</sup> C.B. Fripp, 'Report of an Inquiry into the Condition of the Working Classes of the City of Bristol', *Journal of the Statistical Society*, II (1839), pp. 368-75; Manchester Statistical Society, 'Report on the State of Education among the Working Classes in the Parish of West Bromwich', *Journal of the Statistical Society*, II (1839), p.371 [ch]; Manchester Statistical Society, 'Report on the Condition of the Working Class in the Town of Kingston-upon-Hull', *Journal of the Statistical Society*, V (1842), pp.212-21; C.R. Weld, 'On the Condition of the Working Classes in the Inner Ward of St. George's

was more often owned than used. The chapbooks, whose presence was beneath the notice of the cultural inspectors, were read over and again until they disintegrated. The Bibles existed for consultation, but their chief practical use was for maintaining a private record of births and deaths.<sup>67</sup>

The high base-line of reading material in the home reflected the long-standing Protestant tradition of vernacular spiritual literature as well as the efforts of the eighteenth-century chapmen. It also reflected the phenomenon of domestic literacy. The tables of marriage register signatures were a product of the making of new households but presented the communication skills of society in terms of an aggregate of individual attainments. In practice the readers and non-readers lived together. Between the late 1830s and 1914 the overall literacy rate was 75% but the proportion of marriages in which at least one partner could sign was 85%.<sup>68</sup> In the first period of the drive to mass literacy, just over half the population could sign the marriage register but least one partner could do so in two thirds of marriages. If the increasingly educated offspring of the union are added, the proportion of homes in which no individual was capable of making some sense of the printed word declines still further. Where these existed, neighbours could be called upon to decipher a rare incoming letter, or help compose a response.

By the middle of the nineteenth-century, a tidal wave of print was flowing into these homes. Faced with the rapid growth in population, the churches realised they could no longer rely on texts being handed down between the generations. With immense energy they sought to turn the technical and organisational innovations of the secular publishers against the materialism of the age. The Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge set up a General Literature Committee in 1832 and a Tract Committee in 1834, and by mid-century was distributing about four million items a year.<sup>69</sup> The rival Religious Tract Society issued over 23 million items in the troubled

---

Parish, Hanover Square', *Journal of the Statistical Society*, VI (1843), p.20; J.E. Martin, 'Statistics of an Agricultural Parish in Bedfordshire', *Journal of the Statistical Society*, VI, (1843), pp.255-6.

<sup>67</sup> Louis James, *Print and the People 1819-1851* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p.29.

<sup>68</sup> David Vincent, 'Literacy Literacy' in, H.J. Graff, A. Mackinnon, B. Sandin, and I. Winchester (eds.), *Understanding Literacy in its Historical Contexts: Looking Backward and Looking Forward – Past Approaches and Work in Progress*, *Interchange* 34, nos. 2& 3 (Calgary), pp.341-57.

<sup>69</sup> W. Jones, *The Jubilee Memorial of the Religious Tract Society* (London: SPCK, 1850), pp.246-7; W. O. B. Allen and E. McClure, *Two Hundred Years: The History of the Society for Promoting Christian*

decade of the 1840s. Bibles were produced at lower and lower costs and with the aid of middle class subscribers a determined effort was made to get them into every home.<sup>70</sup> Whether or not this avalanche of free material either slowed or compensated for the fall in church attendance in the expanding towns and cities is impossible to determine. In terms of cheap print, history was on the side of the profane. ‘The general results, then, of our enquiry’, concluded *The Fortnightly Review* in 1889, ‘are first, that there is an enormous demand for works of fiction, to the comparative neglect of other forms of literature, and, secondly, that there is a decided preference for books of a highly sensational character.’<sup>71</sup> With every year that passed more could be bought with less. A penny would buy a 250 word broadside in the 1840s, a 7,000-word serial by the 1860s, and a 20,000-word novelette by the 1880s.<sup>72</sup>

The investigators who followed in Wilkie Collins’s footsteps were frequently dismayed by their discoveries. There appeared an ever-widening gap between the aspirations of the schoolteachers and the domestic use being made of their labours by the new generations of readers. The title of one enquiry published in *The Nineteenth Century* in 1894 captured the general verdict: ‘Elementary Education and the Decay of Literature’.<sup>73</sup> Queenie Leavis’s pioneering study of the reading public, which used Wilkie Collins’ enquiry as an epitaph, continued the lament: ‘The fiction habit, therefore, had been acquired by the general public long before the Education Act of 1870 the only effect of which on the book market was to swell the ranks of the half-educated half a generation later (until then educated taste had managed to hold its own).’<sup>74</sup> Thereafter, all was decline: ‘As the century grows older the bestseller becomes less a case for the literary critic than for the psychologist.’<sup>75</sup> But even within the frame of her literary hierarchy, all was not lost. Alongside the new fiction of such questionable quality, the cost of what was coming to be termed the classics was falling with similar speed. By 1896 the sum of money which once had bought an

---

*Knowledge, 1698-1898* (London, 1898), p.98; J. M. Ludlow and L. Jones, *The Progress of the Working Class 1832-1867* (London, 1867), p.184.

<sup>70</sup> Leslie Howsam, *Cheap Bibles. Nineteenth-Century Publishing and the British and Foreign Bible Society* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp.181-202.

<sup>71</sup> W.M. Gattie, ‘What English People Read’, *Fortnightly Review*, vol.52 (1889), p.320.

<sup>72</sup> Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago: Cambridge University Press, 1957), pp.294-317; ‘Penny Fiction’, *The Quarterly Review*, vol.171 (1890), p.168.

<sup>73</sup> J. Ackland, ‘Elementary Education and the Decay of Literature’, *The Nineteenth Century* XXXV (1894).

<sup>74</sup> Queenie D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, (London, Chatto and Windus, 1932), pp.162-3.

<sup>75</sup> Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 164.

execution broadside could now purchase Shakespeare or Milton with the appearance of Newnes' *Penny Library of Famous Books*.<sup>76</sup>

At the same time, newspaper reading began to move off the streets and into the home. The decisive moment was the War of the Unstamped of the early 1830s.<sup>77</sup> Faced with the most serious constitutional crisis since the Glorious Revolution, the state attempted to exclude the labouring poor from debating politics in print by pricing their journalism out of their pockets through the imposition of a fourpence halfpenny tax. The strategy backfired when artisan printers were able to use the cheap Stanhope iron-frame printing press to produce unstamped papers in defiance of the law. These were distributed, purchased and consumed in a campaign of civil disobedience which threatened to unite physical and intellectual protest on the streets and public meeting places of London and other major cities.<sup>78</sup> As it became clear that persecution was further undermining the legitimacy of the Reform Act state, an alternative strategy emerged. The newspaper tax was reduced to a penny in 1836 in the hope that papers would now be consumed at home and produced by capitalists with a greater investment in the new order. Chancellor the Exchequer explained as he sacrificed a revenue which he was having so much trouble collecting, that 'he would rather that the poor man should have his newspaper in his cottage than he should be sent to a public house to read it.'<sup>79</sup> Despite the abolition of the tax altogether in 1855, it did not prove possible in the nineteenth century for the mass of the population to find the money or the time to purchase a daily paper and read it by their fireside. Instead a number of Sunday papers founded between 1843 and 1850, including *Lloyd's Illustrated London Newspaper*, *The News of the World*, *The Weekly Times*, and *Reynolds' Weekly Newspaper*, entered the ranks of the penny publications following the disappearance of the tax in 1855.<sup>80</sup> To the further dismay of middle-class commentators, during the second half of the century the consumption of print on the

---

<sup>76</sup> Altick, *English Common Reader*, pp. 294-317; 'Penny Fiction', *The Quarterly Review*, vol.171 (1890), p.168.

<sup>77</sup> Patricia Hollis, *The Pauper Press* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,1970), pp. 118-20.

<sup>78</sup> The impossibility of preventing the reading of unstamped papers is discussed in Henry Brougham, 'Taxes on Knowledge, *Edinburgh Review*, LXII (October, 1835), pp.130-1.

<sup>79</sup> *Hansard*, 3<sup>rd</sup> series, XXIV (1836), col. 625. Also Patricia Hollis, *The Pauper Press* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970), p.38

<sup>80</sup> Raymond Williams, 'The Press and Popular Culture: An Historical Perspective, in G. Boyce, J. Curran and P. Wingate (eds.), *Newspaper History from the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day* (London: Constable, 1978), p. 48. *The News of the World* initially lost sales by delaying its response to the abolition of the tax.

Sabbath increasingly meant an encounter with sentiments and forms of behaviour far removed from the material pumped out by the tract societies.

The greater availability of print increased demand for the skills required to use it and in turn facilitated its consumption in the home. Whereas a broadside could be casually read on the street and the newspaper in a public house, the more extensive penny fiction available from mid century encouraged a retreat to domestic space and the search for more private time within the bustle of the household. Here it became possible to respond to the new time discipline of reading, not only the Sunday papers in the second half of the century, but also cheap serials. Dickens' triumphant exploitation of a long-standing publishing form remained a luxury item for the newly-educated, appearing a price of a shilling an instalment.<sup>81</sup> Wilkie Collins' readers encountered him either through the host of cheap pirated versions, which cheerfully took the half-finished serial and developed their own endings, or through the other media in which his stories and figures appeared.<sup>82</sup> At his death in 1870, Dickens became a text amongst texts,<sup>83</sup> but by this time a mass market in sensational fiction had developed, selling as much as two million items a week by the late eighties.<sup>84</sup>

The habit of silent reading, which historians of the book can locate in the homes of the upper and middling orders in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, took time to find its way into the lives of the labouring poor. They had to learn the skill for themselves. All teaching in the early inspected schoolroom was conducted through the human voice, with classes repeating words and sentences dictated to them. The requirement to read or write silently was not conceived as an ambition let alone achieved as a reality until the last two decades of the nineteenth century. There was only a narrow tradition of intensive domestic reading, and little improvement in the facilities for undertaking it. Whilst the rise of factory production caused a slow, inconsistent move of work out of the home, there was no revolution in living space. Between 1801 and 1901 the proportion of persons to a household fell only slightly from 5.67 to 5.20. House size increased, but in 1901 one in twelve of the population

---

<sup>81</sup> See particularly, L. K. Hughes and M. Lund, *The Victorian Serial* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1991).

<sup>82</sup> G. Law, *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Press* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), pp.21-3; Robert L. Patten, *Charles Dickens and his Publishers* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978), pp.90-1.

<sup>83</sup> Vincent, 'Dickens's Reading Public', pp.176-97.

<sup>84</sup> 'The Literature of the Streets', *Edinburgh Review*, vol. CCCXXVII (January, 1887), p.43.

still lived two or more to a room, with much higher densities in many towns.<sup>85</sup> The quality of candles improved, but still meant that reading on winter evenings or in bed was at best a strain on eyesight and the pocket and at worst a serious fire hazard.<sup>86</sup> It was only after the invention of the penny slot meter in 1892 that gas lighting became feasible in more prosperous artisan houses.<sup>87</sup>

Lineaments of the key transitions identified by Chartier are clearly visible. Reading on a mass scale became more silent, more private and more extensive.<sup>88</sup> But every change was contested and incomplete. Entering into the secret world of print amidst the bustle of the crowded household required immense concentration and a capacity to withstand resentment at the withdrawal from its sociability.<sup>89</sup> If the women in the home now had comparable nominal reading skills, their ability to isolate free time amongst the relentless household labour was much less than their menfolk home from work. The variations in command of literacy amongst its members throughout the century meant that there remained an important role either for reading aloud, or for feeding once-read texts into the rich stock of oral story-telling. The increasing volume of readers and reading matter should not be confused with the level of control over access which the category of extensive reading implies. The price of new full-length books came down from the guinea-and-half three-decker but remained out of reach of the products of elementary schools until well into the following century. No reader consumes literature in the order that it is published,<sup>90</sup> but it remained a characteristic of the serious working class reader that they encountered the best of their era only after it had filtered down into the second-hand market or exhausted copyright.

Readers were drawn into the home to deploy their newly awakened skills, appetites and opportunities, and, as we shall see in the following sections of this chapter, constantly pushed back out into communal buildings or the street as they sought to

---

<sup>85</sup> G. R. Porter, *The Progress of the Nation*, new edn. rev. F. W. Hirst (London: Methuen, 1912), pp.91-6.

<sup>86</sup> William T. O'Dea, *The Social History of Lighting* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), pp.40-54.

<sup>87</sup> A. Ellis, *Educating Our Masters* (Aldershot: Gower, 1985), p.16.

<sup>88</sup> Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), p.17.

<sup>89</sup> Louis James, *Fiction for the Working Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p.44.

<sup>90</sup> William St. Clair, 'The Political Economy of Reading', *The John Coffin Memorial Lecture in the History of the Book* (School of Advanced Study, University of London, 2005), n.p.

fulfil them. Reading and privacy reinforced each other and exposed their respective limitations. They were a measure both of the nineteenth-century revolution in production and consumption and of the continuing reality of material deprivation. At a time when most of the labouring poor owned nothing except the necessities of clothing, bedding and cooking, the construction of anything approaching a personal domestic library was a vast luxury. What could be acquired was put together by strategies of appropriation rather than dedicated purchase. As late as the 1930s the publisher Stanley Unwin complained that ‘most people have not yet learned to regard books as a necessity. They will beg them, they will borrow them, they will do everything, in fact, but buy them.’<sup>91</sup> Autodidacts set out on ambitious schemes of self-improvement, conducted in and around the lives of their families and often at the expense of their contribution to its physical and social needs, but were endlessly thrust out of the home to seek the company of the occasional serious readers in their neighbourhoods.<sup>92</sup> In the company of learned neighbours they exchanged books, shared ideas, provided encouragement, and where feasible developed informal contacts into organised mutual improvement societies. From 1851 they used public libraries as a source of new fiction<sup>93</sup> and as a location of quiet, heated, properly lit spaces in which to read it. The free municipal provision of books was a landmark of the late Victorian urban civilisation, but as with so much of the campaign for mass literacy its benefits were only enjoyed by a minority of the working class population. The common experience was of the interrupted reading of fragments of print in noisy domestic arenas.

#### **4) Reading Outside the Home**

The public library was only one of a vast array of new spaces designed for reading that opened up during the period. Such spaces could provide a vital alternative to the overcrowded home, but readers also took over many of the other new public spaces that were emerging at this time, such as the railway carriage, and often found themselves surrounded by texts displayed on advertising hoardings, or plastered on walls.

---

<sup>91</sup> J. McAleer, *Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain 1914-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), p. 85.

<sup>92</sup> Rose, *Intellectual Life*, pp.57-91; Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, pp.109-32.

<sup>93</sup> Thomas Kelly, *A History of Public Libraries in Great Britain 1845-1965* (London, 1973), pp.85-8, 192-5.

In July 1844 the journalist Angus Reach argued that ‘the working man, at least in towns, is becoming more and more a reading man’. This new urban reader had access to ‘cheap schools, cheap publications, cheap lectures, and last, but not least, cheap coffee and reading rooms’. Reach provides a particularly detailed description of the layout and contents of the new sort of coffeehouse aimed at male working-class readers that became a common feature of urban life during the 1820s and 1830s. He claimed that there was ‘upwards of two thousand’ in London alone by the 1840s and that up to 1600 people visited that located near to the Haymarket each day. Unlike other institutions of reading such as the circulating library there was no fee for entry, but coffee was charged at between 1d and 2d per cup. According to Reach the majority of these buildings could seat up to 100 customers and had a similar layout. Most had a distinctive street frontage that consisted of ‘an enormously broad window’ covered by ‘a perfect curtain of play-bills’, which made them easy to find on a crowded street. Inside, the main room itself was ‘partitioned off into little boxes with a table in each’, and like the windows, the walls were used to display more advertisements for the theatre. He describes the clientele politely exchanging newspapers and periodicals between the boxes. Large coffee houses, such as that in the Haymarket took in a wide range of newspapers each day, as well as monthly magazines, quarterly reviews, and weekly periodicals. Some also included a small library ‘consisting principally of works of fiction, and of entertaining and useful information’. Reach’s account of the working-class coffeehouse is somewhat idealised and was clearly intended to persuade workingmen to abandon the delights of the gin-palace, which is depicted throughout as its ‘quarrelling, ... scuffling’ alternative.<sup>94</sup> Other commentators mocked this attempt to take over a characteristically bourgeois environment (and drink) by depicting dustmen politely swapping periodicals as they sipped their coffee, but these spaces clearly fulfilled an important function within urban working-class culture.<sup>95</sup> As already noted, it was often difficult for working-class readers to find a space within the home in which reading could take place, and although the coffeehouse customer needed to pay at

---

<sup>94</sup> Angus B. Reach, ‘The Coffee Houses of London’, *New Parley Library*, 1 (13 July 1844), 293-4. Reprinted in *Victorian Print Media: A Reader* ed. by Andrew King and John Plunkett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp.246-9.

<sup>95</sup> For a discussion of the images contained in Richard Seymour’s *Sketches by Seymour*, 5 vols (London: R. Carlile, 1834), see Brian E. Maidment, *Reading Popular Prints 1790-1870*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp.75-81.

least a penny to read, this guaranteed access to both a wide range of texts and to warmth and adequate lighting.<sup>96</sup>

Communal reading outside the home was not restricted to the working classes. By the 1830s ‘every large’ and ‘almost every small town in England’ had subscription reading rooms that supplied newspapers to those who could afford ‘to pay a guinea or so annually’.<sup>97</sup> The less well off might visit ‘smaller scale penny-a-week’ subscription rooms, or hire a paper by the hour to read at a news-walk.<sup>98</sup> From about 1840 onwards, the fee to join a mechanics’ institute usually gave the male subscriber access to a library, newsroom and reading room. The range of texts taken in by some of these rooms was extensive. The ‘News and Reading Room’ at the Manchester Mechanics’ Institution received ten daily papers, numerous weeklies and American and Australian papers, as well as periodicals and reviews. However, it was not until the 1860s that this and many other institutes allowed female members access to the news and reading rooms, although they had been able to attend lectures and ‘avail themselves’ of the library since the late 1830s.<sup>99</sup> Many of the key reading spaces that developed during the nineteenth century restricted access along class and / or gender lines. Most mechanics’ institutes were founded and run by men mainly from middle-class backgrounds. During the 1820s and 30s there was much debate about whether newspapers should be taken at all because it was believed that they might encourage political discussion, and as June Purvis has argued, the collections of books and newspapers that were assembled tended to reflect the tastes of the middle-class members and their representatives on the governing committees.<sup>100</sup> An article in the *Westminster Review* argued that newspapers should be included in order to attract working-class men who might otherwise go to the tavern to read them. It also suggested that the reading room should be made as comfortable as possible with good furniture, pictures and sculptures, as well as a supply of coffee and other ‘cheap and temperate refreshments’.<sup>101</sup> The image of the Working Men’s Newsroom and Reading

---

<sup>96</sup> Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, p.118.

<sup>97</sup> ‘Provincial Newspaper Press’, *Westminster Review*, XII (Jan. 1830), pp.69-103 (69-70).

<sup>98</sup> Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society 1695-1855* (London: Longman, 2000), p.60.

<sup>99</sup> Purvis, *Hard Lessons*, pp.115-20.

<sup>100</sup> Purvis, *Hard Lessons*, p.120. She also notes that very few Institutes contained periodicals specifically aimed at female readers.

<sup>101</sup> ‘Mechanics Institutes’, *Westminster Review*, 41 (June 1844), 416-45, reprinted in *Victorian Print Media*, ed. by King and Plunkett, pp.240-45 (244).

Room at York, which appeared in the *British Workman* in 1856, shows a well-lit room appointed in exactly the fashion suggested by the *Westminster*. Most reading rooms were probably not as luxurious as this one, but the men standing reading newspapers propped up on boards in this image are an early representation of an activity that took place in public reading rooms and libraries throughout the period 1830-1914.<sup>102</sup>

In order to have more control over the provision of texts, some workingmen founded their own alternative spaces for reading. These more democratically organised reading rooms frequently included classes that taught reading and writing skills. Often begun in cheap to rent or borrowed premises some of these organisations became very successful and moved into buildings that resembled those occupied by the mechanics' institutes, while others faded away as basic literacy began to be taught more efficiently in state schools. As Jonathan Rose makes clear, however, for much of the mid-Victorian period they provided a vital alternative educational space for working-class readers.<sup>103</sup> Similarly, both Rose and Chris Baggs have noted the importance of Miners' Institutes and Welfare Halls in helping to make the Welsh miner into 'a great reader'.<sup>104</sup> The surviving catalogues of these institutions of reading, which spread across the Welsh coalfields from the late 1860s to the 1930s, show that they supplied a vast range of texts, from popular novels to Marxist pamphlets, the latter particularly suited to the development of the 'militant trade unionism and revolutionary politics' which emerged in some of these communities during the early twentieth century. Like the working-class reading rooms of the earlier period, members of the mining community, rather than a middle-class ruling body, determined the stock of these institutions. But as Baggs suggests, however, there was nevertheless sometimes a conflict between what the Library Committee thought its members should be reading, and what they actually wanted to read. He argues that the Institutes and Welfare Halls need to be thought of as part of a broader cultural dynamic, often communal in character, which helped to encourage reading. Penny readings, eisteddfodau, ymanfaoedd ganu, and debating and literary societies were widespread from the 1850s

---

<sup>102</sup> *British Workman*, (August 1856), 78. Similar images of newspaper reading in the 1890s are reproduced in Flint, *Woman Reader*, pp.176-7.

<sup>103</sup> Rose, *Intellectual Life*, pp.63-67.

<sup>104</sup> Rose, *Intellectual Life*, pp.237-55; Chris Baggs, 'How Well Read Was My Valley? Reading, Popular, Fiction, and the Miners of South Wales, 1875-1939', *Book History*, vol.4 (2001), pp.277-301 (277). The description comes from James Milne's 1915 survey of the book trade, *Book Monthly*, vol.12 (1915), p.655.

onwards.<sup>105</sup> By the twentieth century, however, texts were much more likely to be borrowed and consumed within the home- or bought from the newsagent- and these institutions of reading probably played only a residual role as reading venues.<sup>106</sup>

Kate Flint has argued that reading clubs and circles provided an important framework for middle-class reading practices during the period 1837-1914. 'Reading Societies, Essay societies, and Societies for the encouragement of Home Study' often forced women to adopt strict regimes of reading. Writing in the 1890s, Edna Lyall noted that some groups even fined their members if they failed to read for the amount of time, and from the types of text, stipulated in their rules. Both this private group and The National Home Reading Union (NHRU) suggested reading at home for at least thirty minutes per day.<sup>107</sup> Founded in 1889 and active until 1930, the NHRU had more than 10,000 members in 1900, and in the period up to 1914 many more must have been influenced by its educational programme, which encouraged a mixture of solitary reading and communal discussion. During the 1890s the Union offered courses for 'Young People', 'Artisans' and the 'General Reader'. Members paid a fee for which they received a monthly magazine that was designed to perform a tutorial role, and they were encouraged to form 'Circles' that would meet regularly to discuss their reading. Felicity Stimpson has demonstrated that *The General Reader's Magazine* contains important evidence about the advice handed out to readers and the way in which the Circles actually operated. While reading Carlyle's *Chartism*, for example, members were advised to mark their favourite passages in preparation for reading aloud 'in Circle'. Member's letters reveal that these groups often included men and women from different classes and that they met in a variety of different locations, from schoolrooms to farmhouses. One all female group used 'the subjects given for thought' at the end of the *Magazine* articles to help structure their discussion and each member contributed 'her share'. At another in Cardiff, one or two members presented papers on their reading at each meeting, but the subsequent discussion was sometimes

---

<sup>105</sup> Baggs, 'How Well Read', 281, 286-97, 279.

<sup>106</sup> In her survey of working-class Middlesbrough, Lady Bell records that reading at home was the preferred venue, although at least one man read 'a great deal at the workmen's club' but would not 'bring any books home', Lady Florence Bell, *At the Works: A Study of a Manufacturing Town (Middlesbrough)* (Newton Abbott: David and Charles, 1969), pp.150-51.

<sup>107</sup> Flint, *Woman Reader*, p.107; Edna Lyall, 'A Quiet Half-Hour', *Our Mothers and Daughters*, I (1892), 45-6, quoted in Flint, p.107.

stilted.<sup>108</sup> Although, some groups were clearly more successful than others in encouraging lively debate, what is most remarkable about the NHRU is the way in which it encouraged private reading to be converted into public discussion.

The NHRU and private reading societies were founded towards the end of the nineteenth century because many contemporary intellectuals, including J.G. Fitch, feared that new institutions of reading, such as the public or 'Free' libraries, allowed readers to access 'whatever books happen to come nearest, whether good or bad'. As Fitch argued in an article that helped promote reading circles, most of these new libraries included 'facilities for quiet reading in the library itself, or for loan and home study'.<sup>109</sup> How were these new spaces for reading organised and what kind of reading went on there? According to an article that appeared in *All the Year Round* in 1892 the public libraries established at this time were a mix of converted suburban houses and purpose built facilities. The writer's 'own suburban free library' occupied 'three or four rooms' in an ordinary house. Although the library contained only a very limited number of books, the newspaper and periodicals room was busy throughout the day, with young men and women scouring the situations vacant columns early in the morning and working people wading 'patiently through the monthly magazines and illustrated papers' in the evening. By contrast, the purpose built library in the predominantly working-class Bermondsey included a newsroom and lending library on the ground floor, and a magazine room, reference library and 'a "ladies" room' on the floor above.<sup>110</sup>

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century women only reading rooms, which usually stocked newspapers, periodicals and reference books, became a feature in many public libraries. In 1892 *The Library* listed twenty-two institutions with such rooms, including those at Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh. Some others reserved separate tables and it recommended that many more follow the example set in Bradford, where separate counters for women had been introduced in both the

---

<sup>108</sup> Felicity Stimpson, ' "Reading in Circles": The National Home Reading Union 1889-1900', *Publishing History*, vol.52 (2002), pp.19-82 (37,54,39).

<sup>109</sup> J.G. Fitch, 'The Chautauqua Reading Circle', *Nineteenth Century*, vol.24 (Oct. 1888), pp.487-500.

<sup>110</sup> 'A Day at the London Free Libraries', *All the Year Round*, vol.35 (1892), pp.305-9. Reprinted in *Victorian Print Media*, pp. 281-84 (281, 282).

Lending and Reference rooms.<sup>111</sup> Such gendered spaces were designed to separate women from men who had entered the library for physical warmth rather than mental sustenance, but even that centre of London intellectual life, the British Museum reading room, had two tables put aside for women readers when it opened in May 1857.

Ruth Hoberman has argued that actual women readers often failed to fit into, or subverted, the spaces designed for them. Many female members of the British Museum, for example, chose not to sit in the reserved seats and in the 1907 refit the “‘ladies’ section’ was removed.<sup>112</sup> Although, according to *The Library*, separate issue desks and even separate entrances encouraged more women to use the Bradford library, other contributors to the debate noted that women as much as men used the free library to check the racing results and discuss form. While *All the Year Round* found the preponderance of “‘Silence is Requested’” signs part of an ‘oppressive’, disciplining force, which seemed to have robbed the human race of speech, others complained that the public library was anything other than quiet. As Flint acknowledges some representations of women gossiping in the library manipulated stereotypical notions of femininity, but many sources, including the minutes of library committee meetings and autobiographical reminiscences, confirm that these new, often mixed gender reading spaces, allowed both sexes to combine reading with conversation and flirtatious behaviour.<sup>113</sup>

Railway reading was one of the most remarked upon phenomena of the Victorian age, encouraged as it was by the proliferation of bookstalls and newsboys on the platforms from the late 1840s onwards. Much of the evidence that we have for this kind of reading is of the negative sort. In August 1851 the author of an article in *The Times* regretted having seen ‘two young ladies and a boy ... amusing themselves and alarming us by a devotion to a trashy French novel’ during a three-hour journey in first class. That this article was subsequently expanded into a short sixpenny pamphlet suggests that its author had hit upon a particular cultural anxiety about the kinds of

---

<sup>111</sup> Butler Wood, ‘Three Special Features of Free Library Work- Open Shelves, Women Readers and Juvenile Departments’, *The Library*, vol.4 (1892), pp.105-14.

<sup>112</sup> Ruth Hoberman, “‘A Thought in the Huge Bald Forehead’”: Depictions of Women in the British Museum Reading Room, 1857-1929’, in *Reading Women*, ed. by Badia and Phegley, pp.168-91 (186).

<sup>113</sup> ‘A Day at the London Free Libraries’, p.284; Flint, *Woman Reader*, pp.175-78.

texts available at the railway station and the nature of unsupervised reading outside the home.<sup>114</sup> Augustus Egg's painting *The Travelling Companions* (1862) also attacks the practice of reading novels while travelling. It shows two identical looking young women in a railway carriage, the one absorbed in a novel while the other sleeps, as the magnificent countryside of the Riviera passes their window unobserved.

Both pamphlet and painting suggest that it was possible to read in some comfort while on the move in a first class carriage, but the author of an article on 'Railway Reading' that appeared in 1853 challenged even 'the most constant of all "constant readers" to make either head or tail of even a child's primer while in a travelling railway carriage'. This author suggests that it was not the motion of the train that was difficult to cope with, for that could be overcome by holding a piece of a paper just below the line of text that was being read, but the hum of conversation emanating from his fellow travellers. His imagined reader gets through only a few lines of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, purchased from the station's bookstall specifically for the purpose, before returning it to his pocket.<sup>115</sup> Many purchases from bookstalls may have been quickly abandoned in much this manner once the journey began, but large numbers of readers must have learnt to adapt their reading skills to the peculiar requirements of the railway carriage. Until the 1890s, when corridor trains were widely adopted on British railways, there was no getting away from the other people with whom the reader was compartmentalised, at least until the next station. In the 1850s reading was sometimes recommended to 'young ladies' as a way of avoiding 'entering into conversation with strange fellow-travellers'.<sup>116</sup> This tactic of using a book or newspaper to avoid the unwanted attentions of other travellers is one that has since been adopted by millions of commuters. Mary Hammond has argued that throughout the period 1880-1914 the train tended to be associated with light or illegitimate reading. *Tit-Bits* and other new periodicals made up of extracts were ideally suited to reading on the move, and she notes that books banned at some public libraries were

---

<sup>114</sup> *The Literature of the Rail* (London: John Murray, 1851), p.4.

<sup>115</sup> John Naule Allen, 'Railway Reading. With a Few Hints to Travellers', *Ainsworth's Magazine*, vol.24 (1853), pp.483-7. Reprinted in *Victorian Print Media*, pp.268-70 (269).

<sup>116</sup> Mary Hammond, *Reading, Publishing and the Formation of Literary Taste in England 1880-1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp.57-8; Anne Bowman, *The Common Things of Everyday Life: A Book of Home Wisdom for Mothers and Daughters* (London: Routledge, 1857), p.163, quoted in Hammond, p.58.

available at Smith's bookstalls.<sup>117</sup> But, of course, the bookstall did not dictate what people took with them onto the train. Several of the NHRU's general readers describe studying a biography of Benjamin Franklin whilst travelling to work. For those with limited time for study the daily commute could not be wasted.<sup>118</sup>

In June 1854 the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell wrote a letter to her friend the Christian Socialist John Ludlow in which she noted that she could not 'be quite certain of the times of the trains to Wimbledon' because her 'copy of Bradshaw' was out of date. She concludes by asking Ludlow to supply the information from his own copy of the famous guide to railway travel.<sup>119</sup> For much of the period 1830-1914 making sense of a railway timetable would have been one of the commonest forms of reading experience, but historians of reading have had surprisingly little to say about the way in which mass-produced items such as advertising posters, handbills and tickets were consumed. This invisibility is in part due to the fact that book history has tended to concentrate upon books and newspapers as the most important items produced by the book trade, but as Leah Price has noted, recent histories of reading have also focussed rather narrowly on the consumption of literary texts.<sup>120</sup> This is in part a response to the surviving sources. Readers rarely refer to their consumption of ephemera in diaries, letters and autobiographies, although as Gaskell's letter to Ludlow suggests, we may need to look again at these materials with the subject of ephemera in mind. Indeed, Jonathan Rose's work on working-class autobiography has discovered that advertising hoardings and shop windows were important resources for readers whose interpretative skills may otherwise have lain dormant during periods in which they were too poor to buy reading materials. The printer Charles Manby Smith (b.1804) argued that 'every shop-front' was 'an open volume'.<sup>121</sup> Other sources such as scrapbooks suggest some of the ways in which ephemeral publications, including concert programmes and advertisements for holiday resorts, could be invested with personal meaning. During the 1870s Emily Tuke collected these and similar pieces in

---

<sup>117</sup> Hammond, *Reading, Publishing*, pp.75-6.

<sup>118</sup> Stimpson, 'Reading in Circles', p.40.

<sup>119</sup> *Further Letters of Mrs Gaskell* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), ed. by John Chapple and Alan Shelston, pp.112-13.

<sup>120</sup> Leah Price, 'Reading Matter', *PMLA*, 121, 1 (January 2006), 9-16.

<sup>121</sup> Rose, *Intellectual Life*, pp.390-92; Charles Manby Smith, *The Little World of London* (London: Arthur Hall, Virtue, 1857), p.9.

her scrapbook as a celebration of the present, but her annotations suggest that as time went by they became mementos of a lost past.<sup>122</sup>

Advertising also frequently surrounded readers when they took to the streets. Dickens's essay 'Bill-Sticking', which appeared in *Household Words* in March 1851, describes streets filled with advertising vans, 'each proclaiming the same words over and over again', and pavements 'made eloquent by lamp-black lithograph'. He imagines a reader passing dead walls, deserted houses, warehouses, bridges and busses on which the same images appear. There was no escape from advertising in the modern urban landscape, and as Dickens suggests, if any reader paused to look at those displayed on the side of one of these buildings for more than a moment he or she would recognise that they knew them 'intimately' because they were 'ubiquitous'.<sup>123</sup> This is an early observation on the way in which slogans and brand names can become assimilated into patterns of everyday thought in a commodity culture. Unfortunately, the 'real' reader rarely records this sort of response, but in *The Language of the Walls* (1855) James Dawson Burn notes that he enjoyed the strange and amusing conjunctions that often occurred when one poster partially obscured another. As he also acknowledges, the reader on the street was not just exposed to commercial advertising. For much of the period 1830-1914 the walls carried messages about strikes and other political activities, either in printed form or as graffiti.<sup>124</sup>

The other spaces in which readers experienced advertising were much more disciplined than the street. Contracts for advertising at railway stations prevented the display of anything to do with striking workmen and each advert sat within its own frame. The frontispiece to Sampson's *History of Advertising* (1875) reveals that at the major London termini the walls of the station resembled the advertising pages of a magazine blown up to an enormous size.<sup>125</sup> Of course, nineteenth-century readers often dealt with advertising in other contexts. The serial reader of *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), for example, had to wade through 12 pages or so of adverts for consumer goods

---

<sup>122</sup> 'Scrapbook of Emmie P. Tuke', Tuke Taylor Papers, Borthwick Institute, University of York.

<sup>123</sup> Charles Dickens, 'Bill-Sticking', in *Selected Journalism 1850-1870*, ed. by David Pascoe (London: Penguin, 1997), pp.283-93.

<sup>124</sup> [James Dawson Burn], *The Language of the Walls* (Manchester: Abel Heywood, 1855), p.57.

<sup>125</sup> Henry Sampson, *A History of Advertising from the Earliest Times* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1875).

and magazines before reaching the novel itself, but street advertising was more difficult to ignore.<sup>126</sup>

### **5) Reading by Listening; Reading as Performance**

Reading aloud constituted a bridge between the private and public arenas. Performance was as vital as in earlier eras of restricted literacy,<sup>127</sup> but now it existed in more complex relations with silent reading. Secord has argued that by the 1840s 'reading was typically a silent, solitary act, but the object of reading was social - to maintain relations through civil conversation'. He goes on to demonstrate that the *Vestiges of Natural Creation* became a major talking point amongst wealthy, fashionable readers in the year after it was first published. For these readers at least, private, silent reading could be converted into brilliant public conversation.<sup>128</sup> Visual representations of reading throughout the nineteenth century certainly tend to concentrate on the silent reader engrossed in the text. Robert Martineau's painting *The Last Chapter* (1863), for example, shows a young woman reading the last few pages of what is presumably a 'sensation' novel by the light of the fire as the dawn breaks at the window behind her. However, as Kate Flint has argued, such images are part of a critical discourse that played on contemporary anxieties about the unsupervised reading of women.<sup>129</sup> During the 1840s Sarah Stickney Ellis warned against the 'unrestrained and private reading' of novels and plays by young women and children and recommended that all mothers should read aloud to their offspring.<sup>130</sup> Advice manuals frequently advocated that family groups should gather together in order to hear one of their members read aloud. Of course not everyone followed this advice, but a large number of autobiographies attest to the continued importance of reading aloud within middle-class family groups throughout the nineteenth century. As Chartier has noted, throughout history, reading aloud has tended to take two forms- 'communicating that which is written to those who do not know how to decipher it, and binding together ... forms of sociability' such as 'the intimacy of the family'.<sup>131</sup>

---

<sup>126</sup> Jenny Hartley, 'Little Dorrit in Real Time: the Embedded Text', *Publishing History*, vol.52 (2002), pp.5-18.

<sup>127</sup> Fischer, *History of Reading*, p. 274.

<sup>128</sup> Secord, *Victorian Sensation*, p.161.

<sup>129</sup> Flint, *The Woman Reader*, p.4

<sup>130</sup> Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Mothers of England* (London: Fisher, 1843), pp.338-9.

<sup>131</sup> Roger Chartier, 'Labourers and Voyagers: From the Text to the Reader', *Diacritics* 22: 2 (1992), 46-91. Reprinted in *The Book History Reader*, ed. by David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (London: Routledge, 2002), pp.47-58 (50).

Autobiographical reminiscences and surveys of working-class communities reveal that throughout the period 1830-1914 reading aloud often fulfilled both of the functions identified by Chartier, but perhaps more importantly, they also give some sense of what reading meant to those who either performed or listened at such events.

Many autobiographical accounts suggest that reading aloud to children played an important role in passing on a taste for books. In the 1880s, the novelist Florence Barclay encouraged her children to stop her reading every time she uttered a word with which they were unfamiliar. Her daughter recalls that this was not ‘a tedious interruption to the story; rather the reading became doubly thrilling, because there was the added excitement of the hunt after unknown words’. Barclay’s performative reading turned listening to a novel into an interactive game, but as already suggested, many parents read aloud in order to have control over their children’s reading. Anyone following Sarah Stickney Ellis’s advice about reading Shakespeare aloud to the family, for example, would have needed to censor the text by chopping it up into acceptable bits before the performance began.<sup>132</sup>

Reading aloud was particularly important to the family and friends of Emily Shore (1819-1839), who recorded many instances in the journals that she kept during the 1830s. Her mother, father, aunt and uncle all regularly read to the family and their friends in the drawing-room during the evening in much the same way as is described in the advice manuals of the period, and Emily even visited a working-class family in order to read to them.<sup>133</sup> Shore’s journal entries suggest how much she delighted in reading aloud, but she also notes that when she was a member of the audience her appreciation of the text was often significantly effected by the performance of the speaker. In December 1836 she recorded that she had not ‘for a long time heard or read anything which has so interested me and seized upon my fancy as this tragedy’. This interest she thought owed much ‘to the fact of Papa’s having read it, for Papa reads beautifully, and I am sure that if I had only read it to myself, I should not have enjoyed or entered into it half so much’. A few months later, whilst writing about her

---

<sup>132</sup> *The Life of Florence L. Barclay* (London: Putnam’s, 1921), p.240; [Sarah Stickney Ellis], *The Young Ladies’ Reader* (London: Grant & Griffin, 1845), pp.289-90.

<sup>133</sup> Emily Shore, *Journal of Emily Shore: Revised and Expanded Digital Edition*, ed. by Barbara Timm Gates (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), ‘Centenary Edition’, entry for 9 August 1835.

waning interest in fiction, she noted that she had ‘listened with greater pleasure to [the play] “Ion” than to “Ivanhoe”. But “Ivanhoe” lost much of its beauty by being badly read’.<sup>134</sup> Readers with sophisticated reading skills must often have found listening to a poor reader frustrating, and as Shore’s experience suggests, the way in which a text was performed would also have influenced the way in which the listening audience constructed meaning. That Shore also sometimes makes the distinction between having ‘heard or read’ a text suggests that she thought of listening as a very different sort of experience from ‘reading to myself’ and in her discussion of fiction she clearly implies that she sometimes thought of the latter as a superior form (‘perhaps if I had read them all to myself, they would have interested me more’).<sup>135</sup> However, as is clear from her account and others like it, many middle-class readers were accustomed to moving rapidly between different kinds of reading practice. Shore read in silence, listened to texts in a variety of domestic settings (both as an individual and as a member of a group), and was skilled at reading aloud in front of an audience. Her journal entries suggest that reading aloud was deeply embedded within the rhythms of bourgeois domesticity.

The working-class poet John Clare (1793-1864) said of his father, that ‘he was but a sorry reader of poetry to improve his readers by reciting it’.<sup>136</sup> In the 1810s Clare and his father, who could read but not write, regularly performed texts aloud for a family audience that included his illiterate mother. As Lady Bell’s 1907 survey of Middlesbrough factory workers suggests, reading aloud remained particularly important to working-class communities even in the early twentieth century, because they often contained both literate and illiterate members. Indeed, Bell noted that in some families children were responsible for reading aloud to their parents: ‘Husband and wife cannot read. Youngest girl reads the paper to them sometimes, but “she has a tiresome temper and will not always go on”’. In others it was sometimes the literate husband or wife that read to his or her illiterate partner.<sup>137</sup> While these examples confirm that it is wrong to think of the working class as divided into distinct literate and illiterate communities, they also indicate that the *way* in which reading aloud was

---

<sup>134</sup> *Journal of Emily Shore*, ‘Manuscript Volume VII’, entry for 31 December 1836; ‘Centenary Edition’, 3 March 1837.

<sup>135</sup> *Journal of Emily Shore*, ‘Centenary Edition’ 3 March 1837.

<sup>136</sup> John Clare, *John Clare By Himself*, ed. by Eric Robinson and David Powell (Ashington and Manchester: Caracanet, 1996), p.14.

<sup>137</sup> Bell, *At the Works*, pp.142-170 (146-47).

performed must have affected the nature of the experience. Of course, Parker Clare's poor reading style did not stop his son developing a love of poetry, but it must have been difficult to maintain an interest in the consumption of texts when listening to a hesitant reader or temperamental child.

Not every instance of reading aloud took place in the home. In *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861-62), Henry Mayhew recorded the account of an 'intelligent costermonger' who sometimes read 'cheap periodicals', such as *Reynolds's Miscellany*, 'to ten or twelve men, women, and boys, all costermongers' who gathered outside their homes for the purpose. Reading aloud to such a group was an interactive experience with the audience regularly vocalising their responses to the text. Mayhew's informant told him that passages mentioning the police, or any 'foreign language' were often met with angry shouts that had nothing to do with the context of what was being read, but his audience also liked to comment on the events of the narrative. Such reactions suggest that the audience treated these readings as a public performance and that they shouted out in much the same way as theatre or music hall audiences tended to do. This was a relatively small gathering, however, and the text itself appears to have played a role in the performance. The penny-novel journals of the 1850s and 1860s always included an illustration on their front page, as did many illustrated newspapers, and the costermonger told Mayhew that illiterate members of his audience often demanded information 'about the picture'.<sup>138</sup> This kind of performance meant that those members of the urban community who could not read were not cut off from developments within print culture. The costermonger community, which contained a range of different reading competencies, had rapid access to the latest productions of the London press via the shared experience of the text.

As Mayhew was keen to show, the costermonger audience was excited by the new penny publications. Like many other working-class communities they wanted to hear the latest news and the latest stories. Many middle-class commentators were worried by this love of the new. Martyn Lyons has argued that 'public recitals or "penny readings"' in which middle-class audiences engaged show a different kind of

---

<sup>138</sup> Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 4 vols., ed. by J. D. Rosenberg (New York: Dover, 1968), vol.1, pp.25-6 (25).

‘relationship between the reader/listener and the printed word’. At these performances the audience paid to hear the familiar.<sup>139</sup> Undoubtedly the most famous public readings of the Victorian period were those undertaken by Charles Dickens between 1857 and 1870. Dickens’s decision to perform excerpts from his texts was taken after the success of a series of readings from *A Christmas Carol* organised to raise money for a new Industrial and Literary Institute in Birmingham in December 1853. Dickens was particularly delighted by the responses of ‘the working people’ in the audience and the later performances were designed to encourage working-class readers to attend, although as Helen Small has argued, the shilling entrance fee would perhaps have been too high for many.<sup>140</sup> One eyewitness noted that Dickens’s audiences were thrilled by the recitation of scenes familiar from the novels:

the words he was about to speak being so thoroughly remembered [...] before their utterance that, often, the rippling of a smile over a thousand faces simultaneously anticipated the laughter which an instant afterwards greeted the words themselves when they were articulated.<sup>141</sup>

Like the ‘penny readings’ described by Lyons these public performances can be categorised as part of a ‘traditional or “intensive”’ reading practice that was actually disappearing during the nineteenth century, but they are just as much a celebration of the modernity of Victorian print culture and of the celebrity of the author. Even if there were less working-class people in these audiences than is sometimes supposed, they were a tribute to the way in which the serialised text and the cheap reprint had created a very large audience who were familiar enough with Dickens’s texts to sometimes reach the punch-line before he did.

## **6) Reading by Writing**

We tend to think of the nineteenth century as the age of print, but throughout the period 1830-1914 the art of transcription remained an important skill and many readers continued to compile manuscript commonplace books in which entries were

---

<sup>139</sup> Martyn Lyons, ‘New Readers in the Nineteenth Century: Women, Children, Workers’, in Cavallo and Chartier, *A History of Reading in the West* (1999), pp.313-44 (343).

<sup>140</sup> Helen Small, ‘A Pulse of 124: Charles Dickens and a Pathology of the Mid-Victorian Reading Public’, in *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, ed. by James Raven et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.263-90.

<sup>141</sup> Charles Kent, *Charles Dickens as a Reader* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1872), p.20.

made under miscellaneous headings. The *Common-Place Book* of Robert Southey (1774-1843), which included some traditional moral headings as well as a section entitled 'ideas and studies for literary composition', was published in 1849-50.<sup>142</sup> Earle Havens has argued that some Victorian manuscript compilations, which used headings such as 'Chastity' and 'Charity', 'resemble quite remarkably the moral commonplace themes recommended by the Renaissance humanists' and used throughout the early modern period.<sup>143</sup>

The majority of manuscript books compiled during the nineteenth century were far more informal. For example, the forty-one-page volume compiled by Anne Lister (1791-1840) in the mid 1830s adopts only part of the scholarly apparatus first outlined in Locke's 'New Method of a Commonplace Book' in the 1680s, and frequently republished in printed commonplace books throughout the nineteenth century. Lister's manuscript book consists almost entirely of 'extracts' from J.T. James's *Journal of a Tour in Germany, Sweden, Russia, Poland in 1813-14* (1819) and Michael Quin's *A Steam Voyage Down the Danube* (1835).<sup>144</sup> She recorded that the 17 pages of notes from James were made at her home on a single day in 1834. Although there are no formal commonplace book style headings in this volume, each separate entry contains a highlighted key word. Lister was able to retrieve information by rapidly scanning through the pages of extracts, and the detailed references that she made at the end of each entry would also have allowed her to locate the passage in the original, if necessary. That the remaining 24 pages from Quinn were added nearly two years later suggests that unlike the many other volumes of extracts that Lister compiled between 1814 and 1838, which included notes from a range of different genres, this volume was reserved for notes on foreign travel. Lister spent much of the 1830s travelling and she may even have made these extracts in anticipation of a forthcoming trip. The volume that she created was certainly much more portable than either of the texts that she was using as a source, which consisted of more than 1,500 pages in total, and she recorded much that was useful to a traveller. This volume is not just Lister's personalised 'rough guide' to Europe, however. Her dating of when and where

---

<sup>142</sup> Robert Southey, *Southey's Common-Place Book*, 4 vols. (London: Longman, 1849-50).

<sup>143</sup> Earle Havens, *Commonplace Books: A History of Manuscripts and Printed Books from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: University Press of New England, 2001), p.90.

<sup>144</sup> 'Extracts from Books Read by Anne Lister, 1834-38', Calderdale Archives, Halifax, SH.7/ML/EX/11.

extracts were made also suggests that it functioned as a sort of reading diary, which could be cross-referenced with her own manuscript journals at a later date.<sup>145</sup>

Many other nineteenth-century readers also produced their own personalised versions of the texts that they were reading by reproducing large chunks of them in their manuscript books. Martyn Lyons has argued that ‘the private memo-book or notebook’ was particularly important to working-class autodidacts as a ‘method of appropriating a literary culture and conducting a personal dialogue with the text’. For Samuel Bamford (1788-1872), Thomas Cooper (1805-1892) and other working-class radicals, the act of transcription was often part of an intense programme of acculturation that included the memorisation of large chunks of the dominant culture including works by Shakespeare and Milton.<sup>146</sup> Many working-class readers depended upon the new versions of texts that were published when an author’s work was no longer in copyright or had fallen out of fashion. As Jonathan Rose notes, the Welsh collier Joseph Keating (b.1871) read widely amongst the works of dead authors including Pope, Byron and Dickens, but regretted that ‘volumes by living authors were too high-priced for me’.<sup>147</sup> Some contemporary works could be borrowed from libraries, employers or wealthier friends, however, and the process of transcription sometimes allowed those who could not afford to buy the latest works the possibility of creating and owning their own version of the text. Writing in the 1870s, Robert White (b.1802) recalled transcribing part of an otherwise unaffordable edition of one of Scott’s poems that he had borrowed from his employer.<sup>148</sup> Book historians have long been familiar with the concept that when a text is republished it takes on a new appearance that can often change its meaning, but we also need to take into account the various ways in which the reader as scribe transformed a text’s meaning during the process of transcription.

This kind of transcription was not just the preserve of working-class readers. In August 1848, spurred on by the enthusiasm of his friends, Thomas Archer Hirst (b.1830) borrowed a copy of the *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844)

---

<sup>145</sup> For Lister’s journals, see Jill Liddington, *Female Fortune: Land, Gender and Authority - the Anne Lister Diaries and Other Writings, 1833-36* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1998).

<sup>146</sup> Martyn Lyons, ‘New Readers’, p.342.

<sup>147</sup> Rose, *Intellectual Life*, p.121.

<sup>148</sup> Robert White, *Autobiographical Notes* (Newcastle: Newcastle University, 1966), p.5.

from the Mutual Improvement Society in Halifax, West Yorkshire. Although he was the son of a local merchant, Hirst could not afford either to buy the text or to borrow it from a commercial library because he was poorly paid apprentice. After taking two weeks to read the entire book, often jotting down what he thought about it in his diary, he decided to keep it for a little longer in order to copy out 'huge chunks into his journals'. Secord argues that by transcribing long passages alongside summaries of his own thoughts about the volume, Hirst 'effectively wrote his own *Vestiges*'. This intensive reading practice may well have been 'shaped by traditions of Bible-reading among Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and the other denominations of learned, liberal Dissent', as Secord suggests, but whatever its origins, the practice of creating a manuscript book filled with extracts from books too expensive to buy, appears to have been widespread, at least until the coming of cheaper books in the late nineteenth century.<sup>149</sup>

Particularly popular in the early to mid-Victorian period, the album usually consisted of extracts from contemporary poets, with perhaps a few concise extracts from novels or travel writing, and some short prose aphorisms. Although some albums were produced by individuals as private documents, the majority were group or family productions and they help to give us some sense of the role played by reading as transcription within the practices of everyday life in middle-class households. It was common for visitors and friends to be asked to contribute to an album as part of an evening's entertainment or as a ritual of friendship. In many books transcripts of literary texts are interrupted by what one contributor refers to as 'enigmas rare / Charades composed with puzzling care / [and] Riddles for those who like them best'.<sup>150</sup> Such evidence suggests that the communities that compiled these volumes were taking part in a social ritual that celebrated reading as a communal, rather than a solitary, activity. The album was a space in which extracts from the most popular and fashionable texts could be displayed as a sign of the individual or family's good taste. However, as is the case with Lister's reworking of travel books, and Hirst's creation of his 'own' version of the *Vestiges*, those compiling albums did not simply reproduce

---

<sup>149</sup> Secord, *Victorian Sensation*, pp.336-50 (350, 343).

<sup>150</sup> From the 'album' compiled by 'M.A.B.' in the 1830s, quoted in Stephen Colclough, '“A Grey Goose Quill and an Album”: the Manuscript Book and Text Transmission', in *Owners, Annotators and the Signs of Reading* (New Castle and London: Oak Knoll and the British Library, 2005), ed by Robin Myers, Michael Harris and Giles Mandelbrote, pp.153-74 (168).

the text, but reworked it for public consumption, sometimes altering a word or name so that it referred to the book's owner, or fitted the specific interests of the group amongst whom it was circulated.<sup>151</sup> All of these transcribing readers had, at the moment of transcription, a particularly intimate relationship with the original text, but once that text was returned to the library or friend from whom it was borrowed, they were in possession of a version of a text that was truly their own.

By the mid-Victorian period compilations that included both manuscript and pasted (or typed in) extracts from printed texts were increasingly common. These hybrids gave less opportunity for the reader as scribe to transform the printed text, but each volume should still be thought of as a unique object that reveals something of the range of texts consumed by its compiler(s). Havens notes that 'by the nineteenth century, large blank folio volumes appear to have been produced and sold with thick, stiff pages to hold print, sketches, photographs, and so forth'. Usually coloured, these 'special pages' were 'interspersed with normal blank white pages for handwriting'.<sup>152</sup> The resulting compilations often suggest just how eclectic reading had become. For example, the scrapbook compiled by Emily Tuke in the 1870s contains a series of letters on 'mission work' cut from a newspaper and a programme for the 'Friends' first-day school association' conference held in Dublin in 1870, alongside a good deal of other material relating to her membership of the Society of Friends.<sup>153</sup> There are several pages of illustrations, perhaps cut from periodicals or annuals, which appear to have been brought together because they depict similar themes. For example, two pages are filled with images of religious women including one entitled 'the reading Magdalene'. However, this volume is dominated by the various pieces of ephemera relating to her everyday life and travels that Tuke decided to preserve. The pasting in of a hotel label and a map of the Scottish railways memorialise a trip to Glasgow, and there are programmes for events at the Crystal Palace, as well as tickets from 'weighing chairs' located at various holiday destinations. This compilation of tickets, labels and cuttings from periodicals and newspapers suggests that we can recover at least something of the way in which readers handled the most commonly reproduced

---

<sup>151</sup> For a discussion see, Colclough, '“A Grey Goose Quill and an Album”, pp.167-71.

<sup>152</sup> Havens, *Commonplace Books*, pp.91-3.

<sup>153</sup> 'Scrapbook of Emmie P. Tuke of Saffron Walden', Tuke Taylor Papers, Borthwick Institute, University of York.

objects of a modern industrial society. In this instance these ‘ephemeral’ texts gained meaning from their association with events experienced by the compiler.

Tuke’s book shows her skill with scissors and paste rather than the pen. It is significant that even though some of the photographs are annotated, there are no handwritten entries in this scrapbook. Other readers chose to use cuttings to create an object that more closely resembled the printed book. For example, a small octavo volume bearing the bookplate of George Ingles Potts consists entirely of reviews of Tennyson’s *The Holy Grail and Other Poems* (1870) cut from a range of newspapers and periodicals published between December 1869 and February 1870. This volume may have been used as an aid to understanding the newly published volume, or because the reviews contained many long extracts, as an alternative, cheaper, version of the text itself.<sup>154</sup> That such self-made books can often be found in collections of nineteenth-century family papers suggests that cutting and pasting remained an important part of the reading experience throughout this period.

The production and sale of blank albums and scrapbooks was an important part of the book trade. Throughout the period 1830-1914 publishers also produced other texts that needed to be completed by the reader. These ‘interactive’ texts included ‘birthday books, autograph albums, decorative commonplace books, ... drawing game-books’ and confession albums. The autograph confession book was particularly popular with publishers from the 1870s until the 1890s, and experienced a revival during the First World War. These books usually contained a series of questions (‘Which are your favourite songs?’; ‘Is love at first sight lasting?’) followed by a blank space in which a friend of the owner was supposed to write his or her answers in order that their ‘character’ might be revealed. They tended to elicit a mixture of serious and playful responses, and as Samantha Mathews’ study suggests, they provide an intriguing insight into ‘popular taste and reader responses’.<sup>155</sup> The manuscript confession book kept by Mary Tuke between 1865 and 1880 provides some information about the

---

<sup>154</sup> [George Ingles Potts], ‘The Holy Grail and Other Poems by Alfred Tennyson’, University of Wales, Bangor, PR5588.N481859.

<sup>155</sup> Samantha Mathews, ‘Psychological Crystal Palace?: Late Victorian Confession Albums’, *Book History*, vol. 3 (2000), pp.125-54 (134, 133).

dominant attitudes of her reading community.<sup>156</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, the nature of the interrogation changed during the fifteen-year period in which this book was being compiled, but questions about literature, such as ‘who is your favourite poet?’ or ‘who is your favourite hero or heroine in fiction?’ were asked of most contributors. That such questions persisted suggests that Tuke’s community assumed that reading tastes provided an accurate guide to character. Whilst some contributors responded faithfully with quotations from Ruskin as their favourite prose writer, and references to ‘perusing books relating to the Society of Friends’ as their ‘favourite study’, others chose to subvert the format by recording that their favourite poet was ‘NOT Wordsworth’ or by choosing ‘the inventor of black cloth gloves’ as their hero. The former was clearly a reluctant reader, but even he or she was drawn into the social world of the reader via the continuing manuscript book tradition.

Printed confession albums were designed to be annotated, but Victorian and Edwardian readers also delighted in adding to the printed page. According to H.J. Jackson, ‘extra-illustration is perhaps best understood as a way of describing a *collection* housed in a book, the book providing both the hard covers and the rationale for the collection’. Such books are also sometimes referred to as ‘grangerized’. ‘A “grangerized” book is one that has been supplemented with portraits and other images, often cannibalized from other books’.<sup>157</sup> This practice became particularly popular amongst wealthy readers during the last quarter of the eighteenth century and takes its name from James Granger’s *Biographical History of England* (1769), which was often used to collect portraits of important historical figures.<sup>158</sup> Although condemned by nineteenth-century book collectors, extra-illustration became a popular pastime amongst middle-class readers during the Victorian period. Some readers had the book interleaved before the collection was begun, so that the illustrations could be added as soon they came in, whilst others had them mounted and bound once their collection was complete. Some simply pasted additional material into any available space in the book itself. In all cases the extra-illustrating reader was responding directly to the text, but the original did not strictly dictate the kinds of material that

---

<sup>156</sup> ‘Mary Maria Tuke: Notebook used for Questionnaires, 1865-80’, Borthwick Institute, University of York, Tuke Taylor Papers, TAY/75.

<sup>157</sup> Jackson, *Marginalia*, pp. 185-196 (185, 186).

<sup>158</sup> Lucy Peltz, ‘Facing the Text: the Amateur and Commercial Histories of Extra-Illustration’, in *Owners, Annotators and the Signs of Reading*, pp.91-135.

they used. Extra-illustration was a creative act and the surviving books give the historian of reading an important insight into how nineteenth-century readers responded to the texts that they owned.

Jackson describes an edition of Samuel Smiles' *Lives of the Engineers* (1861-68) in which the extra-illustrating reader has not only added portraits of the engineers and their inventions, as one might expect, but turned instances of the author's phraseology into an opportunity for illustration: 'for instance the phrase "rude tracks" in 1:160 justifies a pretty picture of a country path'. She also gives several examples of Victorian readers who used an edition of a favourite author's works to store information about the writer's life. An anonymous fan of the Romantic poets added additional plates, autograph letters 'and a flower taken from Wordsworth's garden in 1844' to Sandford's *Thomas Poole and His Friends* (1888).<sup>159</sup> Readers prepared to go as far as to collect relics were undoubtedly rather unusual, but something of the popularity of extra-illustration can be seen from the attempts of the publishing industry to supply the market with pre-prepared illustrations cut from magazines and books that were already interleaved.<sup>160</sup> This practice seems to have fallen out of fashion by the end of the nineteenth century, although it did not disappear, and other modes of additional illustration including 'watercolours in the text block and margin' and the pasting in of photographs were popular from the 1890s onwards.<sup>161</sup>

The extra-illustrated book is in many ways a more sophisticated version of the scrapbook. However, extra-illustrating readers rarely stopped at adding portraits and the margins of such books often contain manuscript notes. Annotated books are a particularly important source for the history of reading. For example, Secord has argued that the surviving books of the Reverend Adam Sedgwick, Woodwardian Professor of Geology, vice-master of Trinity College and canon of Norwich Cathedral, can help us to understand 'a characteristic form of intensive academic reading'. Although now famous for the review of *Vestiges* that appeared in the *Edinburgh*, Sedgwick was not a professional reviewer. He was, however, a professional reader, and as Secord notes, he handled his books roughly, 'marking his

---

<sup>159</sup> Jackson, *Marginalia*, p.192.

<sup>160</sup> Peltz, 'Facing the Text', pp.91-2.

<sup>161</sup> Roger Stoddard, *Marks in Books* (Cambridge Mass.: Houghton Library, 1985), item 27.

name and address in the front matter’, and scribbling ‘on any available space in the margins’. His copy of the *Vestiges* is marked throughout in pencil, with ‘a plus sign against passages he agreed with, a minus sign against those he disliked’. Passages worthy of more extensive commentary in the margin were marked with a double x and listed, often with further comments, at the front and rear of the book. These longer comments, which were often made up of complete sentences, show Sedgwick building up his argument as he read, with the lists acting as a sort of personalised index that allowed him to return to the most controversial passages in the book. In this instance Sedgwick was reading with a review in mind, but Secord argues convincingly that his annotation system was typical of anyone working within an academic context at this time, and he notes that several of Sedgwick’s contemporaries used ‘similar systems of marking’.<sup>162</sup>

Sedgwick’s practices show just how much of the reading experience can be recovered by examining the marks left in books, particularly when they are carefully situated in the context of the life of their creator. Some book historians remain sceptical about using annotations to recover common reading practices, but as Secord’s work suggests, when used to gain an insight into a specific reading community they reveal much about the quotidian handling of books that is usually missing from anecdotal accounts of reading in diaries and autobiographies. Of course, it is relatively easy to find evidence of readers like Sedgwick because their libraries have been preserved. We know much about the annotation strategies of other important figures, including Charles Darwin and William Gladstone, because their books have become part of the nation’s cultural heritage.<sup>163</sup> The annotated books associated with famous authors are also often intact. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s collection of books on spiritualism and other pseudo-scientific subjects, for example, show that he tended to leave a summarising note next to his signature on the title page in order to remind him whether the book was useful or not, but it is always difficult to determine whether such marks were made for personal or professional reasons in such cases.<sup>164</sup> Large collections from further down the social scale (or from those who were not professional writers) are harder to identify, but the ubiquity of the annotating reader is

---

<sup>162</sup> Secord, *Victorian Sensation*, pp.231-40 (231, 236, 238).

<sup>163</sup> On Darwin’s surviving books, see Secord, pp.427-8.

<sup>164</sup> Jackson, *Marginalia*, p.27.

suggested by the fact that the majority of commercial circulating libraries needed to issue rules forbidding subscribers from adding their own comments to the margins.

Looking back at her childhood from the 1870s, Charlotte M. Yonge (1823-91) recalled that her family were opposed to circulating libraries because they ‘consisted generally of third-rate novels, very dirty, very smoky, and with remarks plentifully pencilled on the margins’. They chose instead to become members of a local book Club that circulated books amongst a select band of subscribers, and she notes how enjoyable it was to hear her parents reading from these books to the ‘assembled family’ in the early evening.<sup>165</sup> Yonge’s recollection of the polite reading practices of her own family reveals much about contemporary attitudes towards circulating libraries and their clientele, but it is also important because of what it suggests about the variety of different reading practices that were available at this moment in history, from reading in front of the ‘assembled family’ through to pencilling ‘on the margins’ of a borrowed book. Indeed, although concerned with defining the differences between the ‘family’ and ‘circulating library’ reader, Yonge captures much that united readers in the period 1830-1914, from the use of public spaces or institutions of reading to access literature, to the continuing manuscript tradition that helped make sense of reading through writing. Reading aloud and the consumption of texts amongst family groups within the home remained widespread even in the early twentieth century. However, Yonge’s easy access to texts was not shared by all, and throughout this period many readers had to make do with whatever texts came to hand, even if they were ‘third-rate novels’. As this chapter has suggested, those readers who were made, or who made themselves, in the first era of mass literacy often did so amongst the dirt, smoke and confusion that Yonge’s family were so keen to avoid.

---

<sup>165</sup> *Records of Girlhood: an Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Women’s Childhoods*, ed. by Valerie Sanders (Aldershot: Ashgate: 2000), p.216.