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## **‘Readers and Reading in the First World War’:**

**Shafquat Towheed, Francesca Benatti, and Edmund G.C. King**

### **Introduction (Shafquat Towheed)**

Long considered to be the most literary of conflicts, with the death of its last surviving combatants, the First World War has now entered the world of archives and repositories. The mass digitisation of primary source documents released to mark the centenary of the conflict open up for 21<sup>st</sup>-century researchers a wealth of possibilities. This dual process – the inexorably lengthening distance from the personally experienced past, and the ever-growing visibility of the documents of that recorded and commemorated past – presents researchers with both a paradox and an opportunity. We have never before had access to such diverse, detailed and comprehensive information about the war – but how can we productively harness this wealth of information to excavate readers and reading practices during in the First World War? How do we locate readers in the geographical domain of battlefields, supply lines, and deployment trajectories? How do we capture, visualise and narrate the relationship between the places in which reading took place, and the range of other factors (proximity to the front line, scarcity of resources, availability of books etc) that impacted upon reading practices? What is the relationship (if any) between places of reading in the First World War and readers’ preferences? Can we productively compare the proximity of conflict to readers’ recorded experiences? Did books and other printed matter follow the same trajectories of deployment as combatants, or were there other, parallel or even independent means of textual circulation that have hitherto been invisible? How might semantic analysis of readers’ recorded experiences change our understanding of the impact of books on wartime readers?

This article consists of three subsections. In ‘A Digital Humanities Approach’, Francesca Benatti looks at datasets and databases (including the *UK Reading Experience Database*) and shows how a systematic, macro-analytical use of digital humanities tools and resources might yield answers to some of the questions postulated above. In ‘Reading behind the Wire in the First World War’, Edmund G.C. King scrutinizes the reading practices and preferences of Allied prisoners of war in Mainz, showing that reading circumscribed by the contingencies of a prison camp created a unique literary community, whose legacy can be traced through their literary output after the war. In the section, ‘Book-hunger in Salonika: H.R. Preece, Summerhill Camp, and a reader on the Macedonian front’, Shafquat Towheed examines the record of a single reader in static frontline, and argues that in the case of the Salonika campaign, reading communities emerged in close proximity to existing centres of print culture. The focus of this article moves from the general to the particular, and the authors engage with some of the wider issues and problems of recovering, interpreting, visualising, narrating, and representing readers in the First World War.

## **1. A Digital Humanities Approach (Francesca Benatti)**

The digitisation efforts of commercial providers and academic institutions alike have created what has been described by Lorna Hughes as a ‘data deluge’ for the humanities.<sup>1</sup> While in many ways challenging, this unprecedented availability of textual, visual and geographical information offers researchers interested in studying the behaviour of readers several opportunities to collect, analyse and visualise information on a scale unimaginable without the use of digital means. For the first time, scholars can attempt to delineate the reading experiences of participants during the First World War based not simply on a few case

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<sup>1</sup> Lorna M. Hughes, ‘Using ICT Methods and Tools in Arts and Humanities Research’, in *Evaluating and Measuring the Value, Use and Impact of Digital Collections*, ed. by Lorna M. Hughes (London: Facet, 2012), pp. 123 – 134 (p.123).

studies acquired through close reading, but also on a large-scale examination of thousands of sources through distant reading techniques.<sup>2</sup> This section examines avenues for the exploration of such data, starting from an evaluation of available data sources, continuing to an examination of possible methodologies for their analysis and representation, and concluding with an assessment of the challenges that a large-scale approach poses.

## Sources

The metaphor of a First World War ‘data deluge’ seems borne out by an examination of the digital sources available. The UK World War One Collections database, compiled by King’s College London and JISC, lists 361 collections, 162 repositories and 85 websites that display digital content on this period.<sup>3</sup> *Europeana Collections 1914-1918* contains over 400,000 freely available items,<sup>4</sup> while the EU-funded Collaborative European Digital Archive Infrastructure (CENDARI) project has the First World War as a main focus area.<sup>5</sup> However, the situation for the researcher is more complex than numbers alone may suggest.

One of the most promising sources, digitised newspaper archives, is quite challenging to use for this kind of large-scale research. Both general digitised archives such as those of *The Times Digital Archive*,<sup>6</sup> and specialised First World War collections including *The First World War: Personal Experiences*<sup>7</sup> and *Trench Journals and Unit Magazines of the First World War*<sup>8</sup> offer the opportunity to perform complex keyword searches, delimited by time,

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<sup>2</sup> Franco Moretti, ‘Conjectures on World Literature’, *New Left Review*, 2000, 54 – 68 (p. 57).

<sup>3</sup> JISC and King’s College London, *UK World War One Collections*, 2012 <<http://jiscww1discovery.net/>> [accessed 18 August 2014].

<sup>4</sup> ‘Europeana Collections 1914-1918 -’ <<http://www.europeana-collections-1914-1918.eu/>> [accessed 18 August 2014].

<sup>5</sup> ‘Cendari | Collaborative European Digital Archive Infrastructure’ <<http://www.cendari.eu/>> [accessed 18 August 2014].

<sup>6</sup> Gale Cengage Learning, *The Times Digital Archive* <<http://gale.cengage.co.uk/times.aspx/>> [accessed 18 August 2014].

<sup>7</sup> Adam Matthew Digital, *The First World War: Personal Experiences* <<http://www.amdigital.co.uk/m-collections/collection/the-first-world-war-personal-experiences/>> [accessed 18 August 2014].

<sup>8</sup> ProQuest, *Trench Journals and Unit Magazines of the First World War* <<http://www.proquest.com/products-services/trench.html>> [accessed 18 August 2014].

article type and other facets, and to download articles. A closer look reveals that what is downloaded is nothing more than an image: while searches are performed on digitised text scanned from the original documents, it is not possible for end-users to download it.

Copyright holders often restrict large-scale downloads and analysis. This is not an unusual situation in the humanities, where scholars work with data collected and preserved by other agents, and frequently need to pay reproduction fees.<sup>9</sup>

The collections provided by institutions, such as the Imperial War Museum, are extremely rich in potential sources, including personal diaries, letters, or unit or trench journals, but again offer data in image format only, though often with fewer copyright restrictions than commercial providers. Extracting text from images through Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software is an error-laden process, increased by an order of magnitude when contemplating the transcription of handwritten documents, such as those submitted by the public to *Europeana 1914-1918*.<sup>10</sup> Crowdsourcing projects such as *Operation War Diary*<sup>11</sup> and *Letters 1916*<sup>12</sup> are using ‘citizen historians’ to transcribe digitised manuscript sources, but this non-automated process is extremely time-consuming.

Paradoxically, the most immediately usable repositories are general collections which contain plain text versions of most of their holdings. The World War One bookshelf on *Project Gutenberg*<sup>13</sup> contains over sixty transcribed personal accounts, while *Internet Archive* returns over 500 diaries, memoirs and letter collections from a search on the subject ‘World War, 1914-1918 -- Personal narratives’ (though this total probably includes a number of

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<sup>9</sup> Christine L. Borgman, ‘The Digital Future Is Now: A Call to Action for the Humanities’, *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, 3 (2009) <<http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/3/4/000077/000077.html>> [accessed 22 August 2014] (paragraphs 33-34).

<sup>10</sup> *Europeana 1914-1918* <<http://europeana1914-1918.eu/en>> [accessed 22 August 2014]

<sup>11</sup> Zooniverse, Imperial War Museums and The National Archives, *Operation War Diary* <<http://www.operationwardiary.org/>> [accessed 18 August 2014].

<sup>12</sup> Trinity College Dublin, *Letters 1916* <<http://dh.tcd.ie/letters1916/>> [accessed 18 August 2014].

<sup>13</sup> ‘Project Gutenberg World War 1 Bookshelf’, *Project Gutenberg* <[http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/World\\_War\\_I\\_\(Bookshelf\)](http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/World_War_I_(Bookshelf))> [accessed 18 August 2014].

duplicates).<sup>14</sup> These repositories have significant and opposite limitations for research purposes. The textual transcriptions in *Project Gutenberg* have been checked by humans, but they usually offer scant information on the precise nature of the original material object they represent.<sup>15</sup> *Internet Archive* provides richer metadata including bibliographic information, but the plain text transcriptions are the result of automated and uncorrected OCR. For a researcher wanting to focus on the United Kingdom, *Internet Archive* has the additional problem of being mostly patronised by American and Canadian libraries, which can skew the available texts away from a UK perspective. There are also smaller projects, like the *Oxford First World War Poetry Digital Archive*<sup>16</sup> and *Cymru 1914: The Welsh Experience of the First World War*.<sup>17</sup> These are curated collections, assembled by scholars and subjected to quality assurance. However, many of their holdings are subject to copyright restrictions and are not immediately downloadable.

## Analysis

Despite these limitations, potential sources can still yield thousands of reading experiences. The present section assumes that text of sufficient quality can be retrieved and examines how traces of reading experiences can be found using an approach that combines text mining and close reading.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Internet Archive* <https://archive.org/search.php?query=subject%3A%22World%20War%2C%201914-1918%20--%20Personal%20narratives%22> [accessed 18 August 2014].

<sup>15</sup> Michael Hart, 'The History and Philosophy of Project Gutenberg', *Project Gutenberg*, 1992 <[http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Gutenberg:The History and Philosophy of Project Gutenberg by Michael Hart](http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Gutenberg:The_History_and_Philosophy_of_Project_Gutenberg_by_Michael_Hart)> [accessed 19 August 2014].

<sup>16</sup> University of Oxford, *The First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, 2008 <<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/>> [accessed 19 August 2014].

<sup>17</sup> National Library of Wales and others, *Cymru 1914: The Welsh Experience of the First World War*, 2013 <<http://cymru1914.org/>> [accessed 19 August 2014].

<sup>18</sup> Frederick W. Gibbs, and Daniel J. Cohen, 'A Conversation with Data: Prospecting Victorian Words and Ideas', *Victorian Studies*, 54 (2011), 69–77. <[http://muse.jhu.edu.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/journals/victorian\\_studies/v054/54.1.gibbs.html](http://muse.jhu.edu.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/journals/victorian_studies/v054/54.1.gibbs.html)> [accessed 21 August 2014] is an outstanding example of this combined approach.

We conducted a preliminary analysis based on the reading experiences collected by Edmund King, who has been examining print and manuscript personal narratives from First World War participants and transcribing them for inclusion in the *Reading Experience Database*.<sup>19</sup> Mostly based on the published diaries, memoirs, and letter collections listed in Edward G. Lengel's *World War I Memories: An Annotated Bibliography of Personal Accounts Published in English Since 1920*, the corpus consists of over 63,000 words, representing 828 reading experiences from 90 distinct readers.<sup>20</sup> It was used to test certain hypotheses, and in the future, will become the training corpus for developing software solutions to the processing of large-scale datasets in collaboration with scholars specialising in text mining and information retrieval.

The corpus was split into two equal parts of approximately 30,000 words. The first half was examined through close reading to identify the 100 most common words denoting a reading experience, supplemented with a similar analysis of reading experiences contained in the *Reading Experience Database* dated between 1900 and 1920. The other half was then searched for those 'reading key words'. Out of 435 reading experiences contained, it was found that these 'reading key words' occurred 1,139 times; the top twenty alone recurring 863 times.<sup>21</sup> Preliminary tests on a number of texts from *Project Gutenberg* indicate that the most frequent one hundred 'reading key words' retrieve on average between five and ten reading experiences per text.

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<sup>19</sup> The Open University, *UK RED: The Reading Experience Database* <<http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/index.php>> [accessed 19 August 2014].

<sup>20</sup> Edward G. Lengel, *World War I Memories: An Annotated Bibliography of Personal Accounts Published in English Since 1920* (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> The twenty most frequent reading key words in the corpus are: read (and compounds), book(s), letter(s), mail, paper(s), poem(s), news, library, write (and compounds), story, novel(s), edition(s), poetry, press, published, newspaper(s), volume, Bible, illustrated, anthology.

However, this method is likely to miss implicit records of reading experiences, like the following, which is not introduced by a verb denoting reading engagement and does not contain nouns connected with reading materials:

...for my next trench spell I have got 'Pecheurs d'Islande' ... also Homer and Virgil, which are standing dishes, and the latter especially very comforting; to them I think I shall soon have to get Shakespeare added.<sup>22</sup>

This extract contains another other type of data that can denote a reading experience: Named Entities. These are terms for which 'one or many rigid designators ... stand as referent'.<sup>23</sup> These rigid designators include 'proper names' of both persons and organisations, 'temporal expressions' and various types of 'location' entities.<sup>24</sup> Software packages such as the *Stanford Named Entity Recognizer*<sup>25</sup> or the University of Sheffield's *ANNIE* system<sup>26</sup> can identify Named Entities. Those most relevant for our study are personal names (of authors), and dates and locations (of reading). Special attention must be paid to the risk that these systems will struggle with the location names in multiple languages and variant spellings that are referenced in First World War texts. An added problem is that some records of reading contain neither 'reading key words' nor easily identifiable Named Entities:

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<sup>22</sup> Adela Marion Adam, *Arthur Innes Adam 1894-1916: A Record Founded on His Letters*. (Cambridge: Bowes, 1920), p. 159.

<sup>23</sup> David Nadeau and Satoshi Sekine, 'A Survey of Named Entity Recognition and Classification', *Linguisticae Investigationes*, 30 (2007), 3–26  
<<http://libezproxy.open.ac.uk/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=26168820&site=ehost-live&scope=site>> [accessed 22 August 2014] (p. 5).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> The Stanford Natural Language Processing Group, *Stanford Named Entity Recognizer (NER)*, version 3.4 (Stanford University, 2006–2014) <<http://nlp.stanford.edu/software/CRF-NER.shtml>> [accessed 22 August 2014]

<sup>26</sup> University of Sheffield, *ANNIE: A Nearly-New Information Extraction System* (The University of Sheffield, 1995–2014) <<http://gate.ac.uk/sale/tao/splitch6.html#chap:annie>> [accessed 22 August 2014]



I have 'The Spirit of Man' beside me. How infinitely pathetic is all the splendid Pantheism in it.<sup>27</sup>

It will be necessary to develop, in collaboration with computational linguists, a Named Entity Recognition system that can identify book titles, based, for example, on the *British Library's English Short Title Catalogue* and the *Reading Experience Database* itself. By cross-referencing the results of these multiple search strategies, it will be possible to extract a high number of potential reading experiences.

The process we envisage is not based on algorithmic means alone, but relies also on expert human scholars for quality control and interpretation.<sup>28</sup> Human researchers need to verify each potential reading experience and either accept it as genuine or reject it as a false positive. These data can then be used to extend the *Reading Experience Database* with a section modelling reading during the First World War, including salient traits such as its date and location, information about the reader, the text being read, and the source of the reading experience. Crucially, the database needs to include the text span surrounding the reading experience. This provides additional contextual information that goes beyond the simple results of text mining and can then be later examined through close reading,<sup>29</sup> allowing scholars to situate reading experiences within the individual histories of readers, the temporal and spatial conditions that enabled or encouraged reading acts, and their affective components.<sup>30</sup>

The *Reading Experience Database* has already demonstrated that the information it holds in computerised form allows the researcher to ask research questions that are grounded

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<sup>27</sup> Stephen H. Hewett, *A Scholar's Letters from the Front*. (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1918), p. 51.

<sup>28</sup> Alan Liu, 'The State of the Digital Humanities A Report and a Critique', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 11 (2012), 8–41 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1474022211427364>> [accessed 21 August 2014] (p.20).

<sup>29</sup> Gibbs and Cohen, p. 76.

<sup>30</sup> Catherine C. Feely, 'From Dialectics to Dancing: Reading, Writing and the Experience of Everyday Life in the Diaries of Frank P. Forster', *History Workshop Journal*, 69 (2010), 90-110 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbp030>> (p. 105) [accessed 28 August 2014].

in the paradigm of the Humanities.<sup>31</sup> The chronological and spatial dimensions of the experience of reading during the First World War could be explored in new depth with the aid of such an expanded *Reading Experience Database*. Potential questions that could be asked include: what were the most commonly read titles during the war, or the most commonly read authors; or whether the location of reading (such as a prison camp, or a hospital, or a front-line trench) influenced what was being read.

### **Interpretation: scale vs. individual**

Algorithmic criticism can discover patterns in texts, but any hypothesis to interpret their meaning can only be formulated by an experienced researcher.<sup>32</sup> At the very minimum, the larger patterns discovered through distant reading can provide ‘contextualisation on an unprecedented scale’,<sup>33</sup> which in turn can enhance and challenge the interpretation of the individual case studies that form the backbone of humanistic enquiry.<sup>34</sup> This dialectic tension between the individual text and Moretti’s ‘collective system’ of large-scale analysis plays a central role in all literary enquiries that are based on a distant reading approach.<sup>35</sup> A study of reading during the First World War faces significant challenges both at the macro-analytical level, and at the micro level of detailed case studies.<sup>36</sup>

In the macro level, the main challenge is due to the representativeness of the texts being studied. With digital texts, there is a double restriction based not simply on what has survived from the past, but on what has been digitised. Linguists who specialise in corpus linguistics construct ‘balanced’ corpora, such as the *British National Corpus (BNC) ‘Baby’*

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<sup>31</sup> On this topic, see Rosalind Crone and Katie Halsey, ‘On Collecting, Cataloguing and Collating the Evidence of Reading: The “RED Movement” and Its Implications for Digital Scholarship’, in *History in the Digital Age*, ed. by Toni Weller (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 95-110.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Ramsay, *Reading Machines: Toward an Algorithmic Criticism* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2011), p. 17.

<sup>33</sup> Matthew L. Jockers, *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History*, (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2013), p. 27.

<sup>34</sup> Liu, p. 27.

<sup>35</sup> Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> Jockers, p. 25.

*edition*, where equal proportions of its 4 million words come from speech, fiction, journalism and scholarly prose.<sup>37</sup> The sample corpus collected by King contains fifty-eight readers ranked lieutenant or captain, but only ten privates and five NCOs. Similarly, the existing digitised sources are likely to include significantly more reading experiences coming from officers than from private soldiers, from the infantry rather than the navy, from the Western Front rather than from other theatres of operation. This reflects a bias both in the creation of original archival materials, as officers generally had more time, freedom, and resources to self-document their wartime experiences, and in their post-war preservation. While it would be impossible to balance a database of reading experiences as exactly as the *BNC*, it is essential that researchers account for social, gender and geographical bias in their sources in order to maintain the correct perspective when moving ‘from explanatory narratives that apply to individuals to explanatory narratives that apply to populations.’<sup>38</sup> Even if the models that emerge are partial and provisional, they can still be interrogated, tested and improved to develop a wider conceptual framework, whose gaps can be identified and filled by later research.<sup>39</sup>

The challenge at a ‘micro’ level is not to lose sight of the individual texts that are behind the numbers used to describe the large-scale patterns, and to still be able to come face-to-face with individual readers. We need these patterns in order to discover what the general or common trends were in the human experience of reading during the First World War, but we also want to compare them to the individual, the specific, and the exceptional: these need not be antithetic goals.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, as the rest of this article demonstrates, they are complementary.

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<sup>37</sup> University of Oxford IT Services, ‘BNC Products - About the British National Corpus’

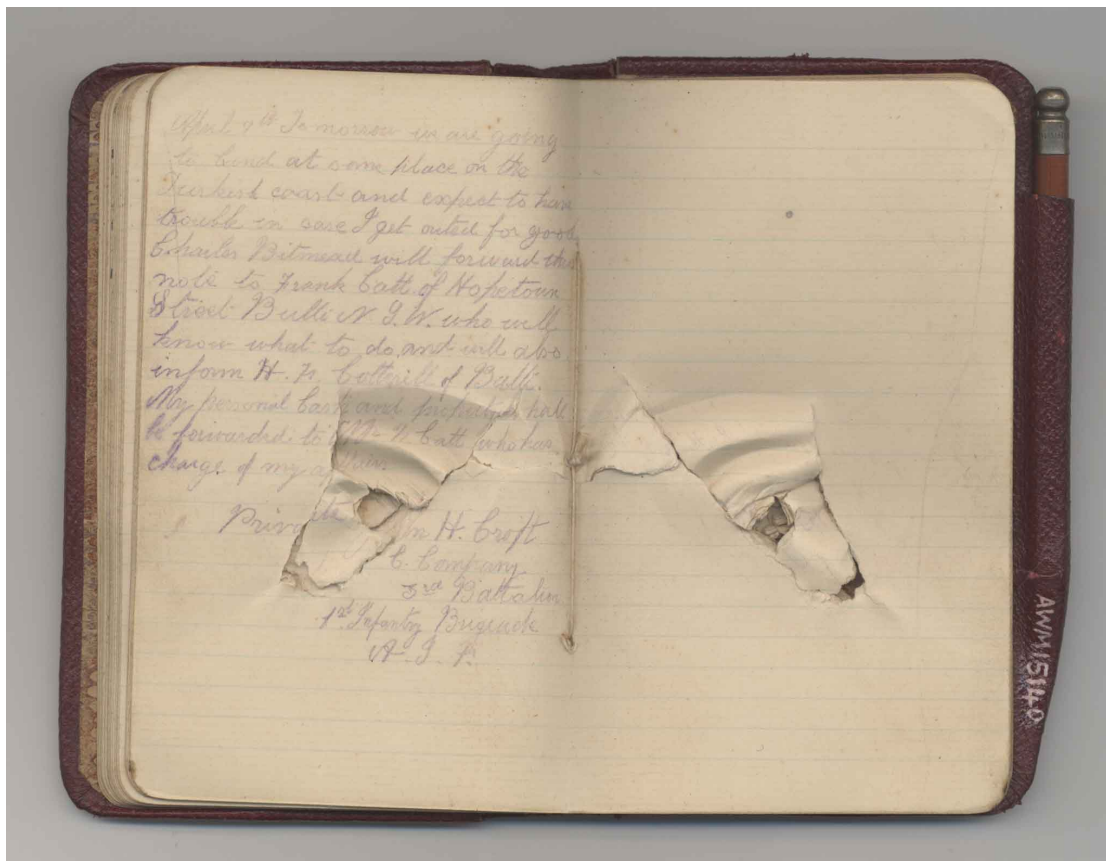
<<http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/corpus/index.xml?ID=products#baby>> [accessed 21 August 2014].

<sup>38</sup> Julia Flanders, ‘The Literary, the Humanistic, the Digital: Toward a Research Agenda for Digital Literary Studies’, in *Literary Studies in the Digital Age*, ed. by Kenneth M. Price and Ray Siemens (Modern Language Association of America, 2013) <<http://dlsanthology.commons.mla.org/the-literary-the-humanistic-the-digital/>> [accessed 20 August 2014] (paragraph 15).

<sup>39</sup> William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 6, p. 444.

<sup>40</sup> Gibbs and Cohen, p. 76.

The data used must be both representative at a large scale, and accurate at the individual scale. It must be accountable. The processes through which the reading experience becomes an entry in a database must be made transparent to the reader.<sup>41</sup> A digital representation of a reading experience is a model that cannot contain the whole of it (such a perfect model would be similar to attempting a 1:1 map of a given location). Often historical readers' records of their reading experiences are similarly referential and synoptic, referring to and summarising the original reading experience without encompassing it. Indeed, certain reading experiences, such as the one in Fig. 1, cannot be fully represented in a database.



[caption: Fig. 1. John Hector Croft. 'Pocket book of John Hector Croft, 1914-1915.'

Australian War Memorial, *Anzac Connections* ,

<http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/RCDIG0000354/>]

<sup>41</sup> William A. Kretschmar, Jr., 'GIS for Language and Literary Study', in *Literary Studies in the Digital Age*, ed. by Kenneth M. Price and Ray Siemens (Modern Language Association of America, 2013) <<http://dlsanthology.commons.mla.org/gis-for-language-and-literary-study/>> [accessed 20 August 2014] (paragraph 6).

The model must therefore be a ‘strategic representation’ that deliberately omits certain parts of the original ‘so that we can work with the parts that matter to us’.<sup>42</sup> It must also contain a trail of metadata and connections that lead back to the original source, so that the reader can retrieve the individual, the specific, and verify or challenge our interpretation of it.<sup>43</sup> It is ultimately this effort at bibliographic accuracy already established by the *Reading Experience Database* that will enable readers and scholars to travel between the model and the modelled, the number and the face, the statistical and the individual.

## **2. Reading behind the Wire in the First World War (Edmund G.C. King)**

The surviving records of the First World War experience tell us that reading matter could be found strewn all over the conflict’s battlefields. Soldiers left cheap novels and magazines behind in dugouts and lookout posts, so that they could be enjoyed by others.<sup>44</sup> Books sent in the post by soldiers’ families passed from hand to hand, becoming the common property of sections and platoons.<sup>45</sup> Houses wrecked by shells and captured areas offered up their own harvests of abandoned books. In a letter home, Rowland Feilding nonchalantly recorded souveniring a copy of ‘the French *Alphabet de Mademoiselle Lili*, par “un papa,” delightfully illustrated’, left behind in a captured German dugout, which he sent home to his own children.<sup>46</sup> There were certain locations, however, that seem to have particularly encouraged the consumption of texts. Some of the densest catalogues of recorded reading experiences available for the First World War come from officers’ prisoner of war camps. In this section,

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<sup>42</sup> Julia Flanders, ‘The Productive Unease of 21st-Century Digital Scholarship’, *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 3 (2009) <<http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/3/3/000055/000055.html>> [accessed 20 August 2014] (paragraph 23).

<sup>43</sup> Flanders, ‘The Literary, the Humanistic, the Digital’, paragraph 18

<sup>44</sup> See *Ivor Gurney: Collected Letters*, ed. by R. K. R. Thornton (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1991), p. 105.

<sup>45</sup> For examples, see Edward Henry Trafford, *Love and War: A London Terrier’s Tale of 1915–16*, ed. by Peter Trafford (Bristol: Peter Trafford, 1994), pp. 72; 111.

<sup>46</sup> Rowland Feilding, *War Letters to a Wife: France and Flanders, 1915–1919* (London: Medici Society, 1919), p. 90.

I will ask what it was that made reading and writing such a common response to the predicaments of captivity, and how the spatial and class dynamics of prison camp itself inscribed themselves onto the individual acts of reading that took place within it.

On 28 March 1918, seven months after the publication of his first novel, *The Loom of Youth*, 19-year-old Alec Waugh was posted missing on Western Front. He was at first feared dead,<sup>47</sup> but *The Bookman* was soon able to report that,

many will agree that the news that Lieutenant Alec Waugh is not killed, but is a prisoner in Germany, is of moment, not only to his family, but also to students of modern English letters.<sup>48</sup>

Waugh was one of at least 90,000 British and French soldiers captured in the first two weeks of the German Spring Offensive.<sup>49</sup> The German system for handling new prisoners was soon overwhelmed. Instead of being transported to one of the main camps in Germany, unwounded ordinary-ranking soldiers taken in March or April 1918 were assigned to ad hoc holding areas and labour detachments in or near the front lines.<sup>50</sup> Poorly fed and often brutalized, these prisoners were forced into a series of exhausting and dangerous tasks—unloading ammunition, digging trenches, clearing the battlefields, burying the dead—often

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<sup>47</sup> 'News Notes', *Bookman* (July 1918), 111.

<sup>48</sup> Eugene Mason, 'Two Poets of the Entente', *Bookman* (September 1918), 183.

<sup>49</sup> Heather Jones, *Violence Against Prisoners of War in the First World War: Britain, France and Germany, 1914–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 178.

<sup>50</sup> Heather Jones, 'The Final Logic of Sacrifice? Violence in German Prisoner of War Labor Companies in 1918', *Historian*, 68 (2006), 786.

within range of Allied shellfire.<sup>51</sup> Those who survived would not re-emerge into the official camp system for many months.

Waugh witnessed none of this. As an officer, his experience of captivity was very different from those of the ordinary soldiers captured alongside him. Exempt from forced labour under the 1907 Hague Convention on Land Warfare, he was quickly integrated into the main camp system. As he put it in *Prisoners of Mainz* (1919), the memoir he wrote after his release, ‘At seven o’clock the Germans came over, and by twelve we’—by which he meant the officers in his unit—‘were being escorted to Berlin’.<sup>52</sup> This disparity illustrates one of the main factors that determined captive treatment during the First World War: class. Traditional concepts of social hierarchy lay beneath the contours of the prisoner-of-war experience. Governing elites in all warring states assumed that captive officers belonged naturally to the upper and middle classes, men captured from the ranks to the working classes. Heather Jones notes that ‘It was taken as a given’ that gentlemen should not be held in conditions deemed fit for their social inferiors.<sup>53</sup> Segregated spatially from the men they had formerly commanded, officer-prisoners enjoyed more food, better living conditions, and more unstructured time than the vast bulk of First World War POWs.

Despite forming a tiny proportion of the total prison population, this small social elite dominated publishing after the war. They had the time, resources, and book-trade connections necessary to secure contracts for prison memoirs; as Joan Beaumont has written, it was their preoccupations—escape, resistance to interrogation, ‘prison “universities”’—that ultimately shaped the popular memory of First World War captivity.<sup>54</sup> Yet it was not solely privilege or nepotism that enabled former officers to write prison memoirs. The material conditions,

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<sup>51</sup> See Jones, *Violence*, pp. 178–82.

<sup>52</sup> Alec Waugh, *Prisoners of Mainz* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1919), p.16.

<sup>53</sup> Heather Jones, ‘A Missing Paradigm? Military Captivity and the Prisoner of War, 1914–18’, *Immigrants & Minorities*, 26 (2008), p.27.

<sup>54</sup> Joan Beaumont, ‘Rank, Privilege and Prisoners of War’, *War & Society*, 1 (1983), 67.

social composition, and spatial dynamics of officer camps themselves led their inmates to adopt the kinds of coping strategies that encouraged reading and writing. In what follows, I will examine how a literary community emerged in one First World War officers' camp and how the social uses of print behind the wire helped create a particularly literary response to captivity.

When Waugh arrived at Karlsruhe camp for processing in April 1918, he found—to his apparent surprise—that it already possessed a fully-fledged reading and writing community. 'After a fortnight's exile from books', he wrote in *Prisoners of Mainz*, 'there is no joy comparable to the sight of a printed page'.<sup>55</sup> The presence of so many 'printed pages' at Karlsruhe was largely due to the efforts of one inmate—another professional writer, the journalist and critic Hugh Kingsmill Lunn. Kingsmill, then a temporary Sub Lieutenant in the Royal Naval Division, had been captured in February 1917. While being escorted away from the front lines, he recited a verse from Heine on the relative merits of France and Germany, much to the amusement of his guards.<sup>56</sup> The fact that he had this quote on hand was no accident. Kingsmill's wartime diaries show that he had been reading Heine extensively throughout 1915, alongside Nietzsche and Schopenhauer.<sup>57</sup> Kingsmill's bookishness and general air of absentmindedness suggest that he was not an especially efficient officer. As a former colleague recalled in the 1920s:

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<sup>55</sup> Waugh, *Prisoners of Mainz*, pp. 8–10; 37.

<sup>56</sup> Hugh Kingsmill, *Behind Both Lines* (London: Morley & Mitchell Kennerley Jr., 1930), p. 67.

<sup>57</sup> See Hugh Kingsmill Lunn, '1915 Diary', British Library Add MS 85373, entries for 25 and 28–31 October; and 7 November 1915.



On one occasion, when you were supposed to inspect the guard, you didn't like the idea of going through the mud, so you *sent* for the guard, and inspected them from the doorway, in slippers, with a newspaper under your arm.<sup>58</sup>

The circumstances of Kingsmill's capture show how useful some of these traits could be in captivity. Bookishness could be, quite literally, a survival strategy. Kingsmill's resourcefulness in deploying his knowledge of German literature evidently defused tensions at the point of capture and enabled him to 'bridge the language divide' between captor and captive.<sup>59</sup>

Kingsmill's diaries show that he was able to resume his habitual reading and writing practices soon after capture. Two days afterwards, his diary records that he was 'Taken along to officer's quarters', where he was interrogated and given a 'Meal of sorts', after which he 'doze[d] & read'.<sup>60</sup> By 8 February, he had somehow managed to obtain a copy of Gunther Plüschow's recently published POW escape narrative, *Die Abenteuer des Fliegers von Tsingtau*, at that point a bestseller in Germany.<sup>61</sup> Once he arrived at Karlsruhe a week later, he seized upon any reading material he could find. In addition to the *New Testament*, Kingsmill records reading popular fiction like Gene Stratton Porter's *A Girl of the Limberlost*, Charles Garvice's *Fair Impostor*, and Florence Marryat's *A Soul on Fire*, the last of which moved him to comment in his diary, 'probably the most idiotic book ever written'.<sup>62</sup> By 18 February (two weeks after capture) Kingsmill had started writing a novel of his own, which he worked on in the camp's dining room. The extent to which Kingsmill structured his

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<sup>58</sup> Kingsmill, *Behind Both Lines*, p. 22.

<sup>59</sup> Simon Constantine, 'War of Words: Bridging the Language Divide in the Great War', *War in History*, 18 (2011), 515.

<sup>60</sup> Kingsmill, 'Agenda 1917', BL Add MS 85374, 6 February 1917.

<sup>61</sup> BL Add MS 85374, 8 February 1917.

<sup>62</sup> BL Add MS 85374, 20, 21, and 26 February 1917.

days around the twinned consumption of books and food is clear from the following entry: ‘Februar[y] 16. Friday ... Stroll in enclosure. Read. [Lunch]. Read. Shaved. Meal in our hut. Read & stroll. Supper. Read. Another meal’. At the bottom of the page, Kingsmill identifies his reading matter for the day: Ethel M. Dell’s 1916 romance novel, *The Bars of Iron*.<sup>63</sup>

For most non-commissioned prisoners in Germany, the question of how to spend time in captivity was determined by the simple fact of being subject to forced labour.<sup>64</sup> In a post-war account of his prison experiences, Private E. G. Girand records being put to work soon after capture ‘unloading and stacking timber’ for ten hours each day. After the end of a day’s work, he recalled, ‘we just sat on the end of our bunks ... & then lay down & slept’.<sup>65</sup> Officers, by contrast, led much more sedentary and predictable lives, but the class privilege that exempted officers from labour imposed its own difficulties. Officers needed to develop coping strategies to manage the surplus of unstructured time they were faced with. ‘One ... needs an occupation’, wrote French officer POW Georges Connes. ‘We would be delighted to dig up potatoes or move gravel, but these distractions are forbidden to us’.<sup>66</sup> Less mobility also meant less turnover in personnel, meaning that officer-POWs were, as psychologist A.L. Vischer later put it, ‘continually thrown back upon the same companions, from whom there [was] no escape’.<sup>67</sup> This social claustrophobia was heightened by the general lack of internal walls and noise insulation. Prisoners were therefore forced to live largely in public. As Alec Waugh noted, ‘For not one moment was it possible to be alone ... We all got on each other’s nerves horribly ... it was no joke to be in the constant company of the same people, to hear

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<sup>63</sup> BL Add MS 85374, 16 February 1917.

<sup>64</sup> Edmund G.C. King, “‘Books Are More to Me than Food’: British Prisoners of War as Readers, 1914–1918”, *Book History*, 16 (2013), 247–71 (pp. 258–9).

<sup>65</sup> Private E.G. Girand, [Account of captivity], National Army Museum, 1994-03-337, pp. 2–3.

<sup>66</sup> Georges Connes, *A POW’s Memoir of the First World War: The Other Ordeal*, ed. Lois Davis Vines (Oxford: Berg, 2004), pp. 53, 43.

<sup>67</sup> A.L. Vischer, *Barbed Wire Disease: A Psychological Study of the Prisoner of War* (London: John Bale, 1919), p. 27.

the same anecdotes, the same opinions ... [After] six months ... nearly everyone had got utterly fed up with his room and the inmates of it'.<sup>68</sup>

Literature provided one point of refuge from the enforced sociability of camp life. Readers could simply retreat behind the covers of a book.<sup>69</sup> When read in company, a book offers what Erving Goffman calls an 'involvement shield', a barrier demarcating a private space within a wider social collective.<sup>70</sup> Textual shields of this sort were especially useful in the claustrophobic and contested spaces of captivity.<sup>71</sup> Connes, for instance, wrote that one of his fellow prisoners spent most of his time 'with his nose in a book. Short sighted, he holds it very close to his eyes, twelve hours a day, even when he is walking'.<sup>72</sup> Literature could also be a more active form of occupation. Many officer-POWs used their time in captivity to organize and attend classes in their chosen professions. Another Mainz prisoner, Second Lieutenant H.T. Ringham observed, that 'The Bankers, the Architects, Surveyors and Accountants—in fact most of the professions—have a kind of class each week. A sort of preparation for civilian life'.<sup>73</sup> Identifying as members of a community of writers offered prisoners a similar sense of communal belonging and occupation-based identity. The reading and writing communities that Kingsmill established, first at Karlsruhe then at Mainz, provided a way of bringing these two book-based coping mechanisms together. The assertion of a literary vocation offered a way of both countering the social claustrophobia of prison camp and ideating a successful re-entry into the civilian world after the war.

By March 1917, Kingsmill had begun interspersing his initial solitary reading practices with more group-based events. He was teaching English to one Belgian inmate

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<sup>68</sup> Waugh, *Prisoners of Mainz*, pp. 138–9.

<sup>69</sup> For a summary of recent scholarship on 'antisocial' reading practices, see Debra Gettelman, 'The Psychology of Reading and the Victorian Novel', *Literature Compass*, 9 (2012), 207–9.

<sup>70</sup> Erving Goffman, *Behaviour in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* (1963; New York: Free Press, 1969), pp. 39–40.

<sup>71</sup> See King, p. 262.

<sup>72</sup> Connes, p. 64.

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in King, p. 264.

using a copy of *King Lear* and reading his own translations of articles from the *Frankfurter Zeitung* aloud to another English officer.<sup>74</sup> His diary entries show how embedded reading was within the social routines of camp life:

Monday [March 12]. Tea. F[rankfurter] Z[eitung] ... Doze ... Read with [his Belgian friend] Rouss:[elet] ... Sunday [April 22]. B[reakfast]. Read etc. [Lunch]. To Hunt & Davies. Take some books from them. Read the Cornhill [Magazine] etc. Tea. To R[ousselet] ... Supper. Read & doze.<sup>75</sup>

These improvised reading groups show how books and newspapers could act as catalysts for social activity. They were prompts for conversation, foci for acquaintanceships, tickets that eased Kingsmill's passage into other huts and areas of the camp.

To function, however, these networks needed a continual supply of texts. Censorship meant that new books could only enter the camp when sent direct from a publisher or licensed charity. Kingsmill responded by establishing a lending library. On March 22, he recorded receiving a parcel of 'German books'. By the end of April, he was systematically rounding up surplus titles and cataloguing the library's holdings.<sup>76</sup> (As he was also a member of the camp's relief committee, Kingsmill presumably used Red Cross channels to supply the bulk of the library's book stock.) The other task was to recruit readers. On 25 March, he was introduced to John Ferrar Holms, a 19-year-old Second Lieutenant in the Highland Light Infantry.<sup>77</sup> He quickly discovered that Holms was, as he put in his post-war memoir, an

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<sup>74</sup> BL Add MS 85374, 1 March 1917.

<sup>75</sup> BL Add MS 85374, 12 March 1917; 22 April 1917.

<sup>76</sup> See BL Add MS 85374, entries for 28, 29, and 30 April 1917.

<sup>77</sup> BL Add MS 85374

‘extraordinarily interesting companion’ who had ‘read a great deal’.<sup>78</sup> Holms and Kingsmill were soon spending much of their time together, talking and reciting literature way into the night, to the exasperation of inmates trying to sleep in neighbouring rooms.<sup>79</sup> One of Kingsmill’s duties as a Red Cross representative was to interview and brief new arrivals. When he discovered new prisoners with like-minded interests, he would initiate them into the reading circles he had already established. Kingsmill’s ‘discoveries’ at Karlsruhe included Alec Waugh, the future BBC producer Lance Sieveking, the writer Gerard Hopkins, and the music-hall star and satirist James Milton Hayes.<sup>80</sup> On 12 April 1918, Kingsmill had invited Waugh to his room, where he had stayed ‘to supper’. Two days later, Kingsmill started reading *The Loom of Youth*.<sup>81</sup> When Milton Hayes arrived, Kingsmill regarded him with similar professional curiosity. Over tea, they discussed at length the challenges of writing for the music-hall stage.<sup>82</sup>

Despite the apparent collegiality of these groups, the social stresses of captivity lurked just beneath the surface. Alongside their public activities, members also contributed to a shadow world of anonymous publication that circulated in camp magazines. This material could be scabrous. An ‘Illusory Interview’, in the August/September 1918 issue of the Mainz camp journal, *The Queue*, is aimed squarely at Kingsmill and Holms:

Not wishing to wake our celebrity during the day ... we waited for him at 10.57 p.m. in his favourite corner. We were fortunate in finding him in excellent form, his friend ‘Bovril’ also being there ... ‘What is your opinion on Driveloffski?’ we ventured. ‘Not without merit’ came the answer ... but not up to Dosto’. ‘And what modern

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<sup>78</sup> Kingsmill, *Behind Both Lines*, p. 102.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 114–15.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 147–8; 172–3; 179–80.

<sup>81</sup> Kingsmill, ‘Tage-Buch 1918’, BL Add MS 85375, entries for 16 and 18 April 1918.

<sup>82</sup> BL Add MS 85375, 20 April 1918; Kingsmill, *Behind Both Lines*, pp. 173–5.

authors would you class as Alphas’ we continued. ‘A difficult question, isn’t it Bovril?’ ‘Delightful!’ shrieked the latter, not heeding the question, but merely thinking aloud about his book ... ‘Delightful,’ echoed H. K. L. and we fled.<sup>83</sup>

This unsigned piece effectively skewers the literary conversation taking place in Kingsmill’s circle, but its intended reading audience was also clearly members of that same social group. The piece relies for effect on the kinds of intimate social details—Kingsmill’s night-owl tendencies, the knowledge that Holms’s nickname was OXO, the fact (as recorded in his diary) that Kingsmill had been reading Tolstoy and Chekhov that month—that could only have been obtained by someone who had spent a lot of time in their company. Its prickliness reflects the irritations that such close intimacy could produce, but it also illustrates the role that the prison press could play in providing a valve for social tension through humour and complaint.<sup>84</sup>

The fact that these satirical sketches were printed at all reflects the relative cultural freedom enjoyed by officers in Mainz. Exempt from the harsh discipline and demanding physical labour to which the vast majority of First World War prisoners were subjected, they were open to experiences and opportunities that would have been rare even in peacetime. In a post-war memoir, Lance Sieveking looked back on prison camp as having been ‘rather like one imagines Paradise’. He had been able to write and produce a play, learn languages, improve his piano- and cello-playing skills, and mix with an intellectually stimulating group of fellow-inmates drawn from many nations. As he put it in his memoir, he had ‘kindred spirits ... available for companionship and talk at any time ... in a way that can never happen

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<sup>83</sup> *The Queue: Mainz Monthly Magazine* (August/September 1918), 4.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Graham Seal, *The Soldiers’ Press: Trench Journals in the First World War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 106.

in ordinary life'.<sup>85</sup> Sieveking and his fellow prisoners maintained the writing networks they had forged in prison camp well after the war. As Waugh later wrote: 'during the early post-war years we saw a lot of one another, Hopkins, Holms, Hayes, Kingsmill and myself'.<sup>86</sup> After repatriation, Sieveking collaborated on a number of small publishing projects with the artist Alec MacDonald, whom he had met in Mainz.<sup>87</sup> When Kingsmill finished the novel he had started at Karlsruhe, Waugh suggested he send it to his father's firm, Chapman & Hall, who published it in 1919.<sup>88</sup> Kingsmill later attempted to help John Ferrar Holms kick-start his own writing career and, after Holms's sudden death at 36, tried unsuccessfully to interest publishers in issuing a volume of his letters.<sup>89</sup>

The density of wartime aesthetic experience recorded by members of this circle is unrepresentative of the vast majority of British soldiers, let alone prisoners of war. Most ordinary-ranking POWs had limited access to books and time to read; due to the increased security in men's camps, they had few opportunities to record their reading in diaries or notebooks. Assembling a balanced corpus of reading experiences using this kind of archival evidence alone is therefore impossible. 'Elite' sources like the diaries and memoirs documenting the Mainz reading circle provide most of the surviving evidence—the rest is a yawning archival silence. At the same time, the experiences of Waugh, Kingsmill, and their colleagues should not simply be dismissed due to their exceptional nature.<sup>90</sup> They show how the social dynamics of certain wartime spaces could promote not only reading but an intensity of literary production and consumption. The friendship networks and patterns of behaviour forged in the confines of camp, meanwhile, could persist long after the armistice. If, as Roger

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<sup>85</sup> Quoted in David Hendy, 'Painting with Sound: The Kaleidoscopic World of Lance Sieveking, a British Radio Modernist', *Twentieth Century British History*, 24 (2013), 169–200 (p. 179).

<sup>86</sup> Alec Waugh, *My Brother Evelyn and Other Profiles* (1967; London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 80.

<sup>87</sup> See, for instance, Lancelot de Giberne Sieveking, *Gladstone Bags and Marmalade*, illustrated by Alec Macdonald (London: Cecil Palmer, 1920).

<sup>88</sup> Waugh, *My Brother Evelyn*, p. 90.

<sup>89</sup> *Rough Draft: The Modernist Diaries of Emily Holmes Coleman, 1929–1937*, ed. by Elizabeth Podnieks (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2012), p. 257.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. Crone and Halsey, pp. 96–7.

Chartier writes, reading ‘is always a practice embodied in acts, spaces, and habits’, the First World War officers’ prisoner of war camp is surely one of the most extraordinary examples of how physical space could determine wartime reading practices and transform the lives of the readers within it.<sup>91</sup>

### **3: Book-hunger in Salonika: H.R. Preece, Summerhill Camp, and a reader on the Macedonian front (Shafquat Towheed)**

In this final section, I contextualise a case study of a single reader in a single conflict zone. A public school educated aspiring poet, Lieutenant Henry Raymond Preece (1898-1918) volunteered on both the Macedonian and (later) the Western Front, where he was killed in action on 8 October 1918. He was a voracious reader who left hundreds of records of his reading in private diaries and his letters home.<sup>92</sup> Some of these references are cursory, while others are detailed and evaluative. Reading took up much of Preece’s time on deployment on the Macedonian front. For clarity, I refer to the Greek city today called Thessalonikí as Salonika, and use the term the ‘Macedonian front’ to describe the area contiguous to the front line between the Allied and Axis powers, rather than as a contested geopolitical term.

An anecdote from Preece’s diary illustrates some of the complexities of books and readers in the First World War. Just a couple of weeks after the Great Fire of Salonika on the weekend of the 18-19 August 1917 had destroyed over a third of the city and left more than 70,000 people homeless, Preece, a 19 year-old public school educated English Lieutenant in the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion King’s Royal Rifle Corps recently arrived at the nearby British Army base at

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<sup>91</sup> Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. by Lydia G. Cochrane (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 3.

<sup>92</sup> Private papers of Lieutenant H. R. Preece, Imperial War Museum, Special Collections, reference 12717. Hereafter cited as ‘Preece’.



Summerhill Camp, visited the city with one specific aim: to buy books. After a ‘short visit to Oposdi Books, one of the few unburnt shops’, he made ‘an attempt to buy books in English or French or even classical Greek’, but ‘alas all the bookshops were burnt & it was with damped ardour that we climbed on a lorry after a considerable delay & returned to Summerhill in time for lunch’.<sup>93</sup> This might come across as a classic example of the book hunger of an intellectually starved wartime reader, frustrated by the book destruction all around him, but that would be a partially misleading initial assumption. While Preece’s account foregrounds choice and agency (he is looking for quality literature in three of the four languages he could read competently: English, French and classical Greek), it does not necessarily indicate paucity of reading material, for in his diary the next day, he notes that he read C.K. Chesterton’s *The Innocence of Father Brown* (1911) after breakfast and until lunch; every single diary entry for the next week shows considerable time spent reading. Preece’s quick trip from the Allied headquarters at Summerhill camp into town, far from showing the distance between some First World War combatants and their books, illustrates their proximity, for much of the Macedonian campaign was not fought in a bookless wilderness, but in a densely textually populated geographical space.

### **Salonika as a centre of printing and reading**

Preece’s Macedonian war was spent in close proximity to a major centre of printing. Salonika had a printing press as early as 1512, before Istanbul (1530), and for the four centuries of the Ottoman period (which came to an end in 1912), the city was one of the world’s leading centres of Jewish learning and printing in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and in the Judaeo-Spanish language of Ladino, the de facto mother tongue of the substantial Sephardic Jewish community. As one of the region’s pre-eminent trading ports, it was also a node for the transmission of books across the Mediterranean and into the Balkans and Asia Minor. In

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<sup>93</sup> Preece, Diary entry for 3 September 1917, Diary Vol. 1, additional reference 04/4/1/PREECE.

common with the other major urban centres of the Ottoman empire (Istanbul, Izmir and Aleppo), the educated elite in Salonika was Francophone, and there was a ready supply of French books, newspapers and publications; as the cultural capital of the new Greek state, it was famous for its café and literary life, one enjoyed by visiting soldiers, (such as the 7<sup>th</sup> Welsh Battalion), and locals alike. J.J. Mackenzie, a Toronto University pathologist working at the Canadian Number 4 hospital in Salonika and an avid reader who left dozens of records of his reading in his correspondence, noted the city's importance as a conduit for goods, services and ideas: 'in its position it is very like Venice, and with its railway connections with the hinterland its trade importance is enormous' he noted.<sup>94</sup> For another Allied soldier, the engraver and amateur poet William Waterworth, reading (and a pipe) provided a visual verification for his friends and family at home that all was well and that letters and book parcels arrived in a timely fashion.<sup>95</sup> For Lt Col Jourdain from the Irish 5<sup>th</sup> Connaught Rangers the presence of reading material normalised and domesticated a bivouac on a Macedonian ridge.<sup>96</sup> British soldiers at Summerhill camp and those deployed on the nearby Bulgarian frontline were not remote from reading matter: supply lines were short, and the speed and efficiency of the communications circuit was remarkable. Deployed from his native Sheffield to the Macedonian Front at Mihalovo in March 1917, William D. Mather noted the speed with which letters from home arrived:

Another great surprise awaits me when I get back to camp as I find a letter from home which cheers me up no end, especially as no one else has had one yet, not even those who have been here a week longer than I. It is just six weeks since we left England

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<sup>94</sup> J.J. Mackenzie, *Number 4 Canadian Hospital: The Letters of Professor J. J. Mackenzie from the Salonika Front* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1933), p.145.

<sup>95</sup> William Waterworth, *Europeana 1914-1918*, <http://www.europeana1914-1918.eu/en/contributions/3231>, image 5 [accessed 1 September 2014]

<sup>96</sup> Photographs relating to the service of Lt Col H.F.N. Jourdain of the 5<sup>th</sup> Connaught Rangers, Imperial War Museum Photographic Collections, Q55142 and Q55140.

and the letter had only taken three weeks to reach this edge of the beyond which was really rather marvellous.<sup>97</sup>

Mather later worked with the Gaiety Theatre in Kalinova where pantomime adaptations and burlesques of popular literary works (such as *Robinson Crusoe*) were staged every night, with additional matinees on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Mather also recalled how he would spend Sunday afternoons at the British Army's District Headquarters in Vergetor, where 'there was an unlimited supply of books and magazines which we read avidly.'<sup>98</sup> Book hunger was not entirely caused by scarcity, but by appetite: a diverse, largely literate deployment of troops with purchasing power living close to a centre of the book trade could only mean one thing: that printed matter would be procured and/or produced to meet demand. In the Macedonian Front, it resulted in one of the most remarkable of literary efforts, and one which effectively mediated a conflict both to its participants and to the wider world: *The Balkan News*.

### ***The Balkan News***

*The Balkan News* was the only dedicated English language daily newspaper serving British and Allied readers on the Macedonian front during the war. Launched in November 1915 and priced at one penny, it was printed daily almost without interruption for over three years until 10 May 1919, as either a four page or a single page newsletter. It was sold directly from its offices in Salonika, hawked on the streets, and distributed and sold throughout the front. *The Balkan News* was successively edited by two men with considerable experience in pre-war journalism: novelist and associate editor of *Outlook*, Albert Kinross (1870-1929) and the journalist and science fiction writer, Harry Collinson Owen (1882-1956). Kinross, its

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<sup>97</sup> William D. Mather, *'Muckydonia' 1917-1919: Being the Adventures of a One-Time 'Pioneer' in Macedonia and Bulgaria during the First World War* (privately printed, 1979), p.45.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p.197.

founding editor, proudly declared that it was ‘the first daily newspaper to come into being purely for the needs of an army’.<sup>99</sup> It was a ubiquitous presence in the accounts of those who served on the Macedonian front and its impact cannot be underestimated. For Douglas Harfield, a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion Hampshire regiment at Summerhill camp, his understanding of contemporary Greek politics and events on the Western Front came from the paper; for Henry Raymond Preece, it was a constant companion and its reappearance after the destruction wrought by the fire a welcome one. For William D. Mather, this newspaper mediated the conflict and provided a vital service for a geographically and linguistically defined community of participant readers. Arriving in Summerhill Camp in February 1917, he made his ‘first acquaintance with *The Balkan News* which for 2 years is to be our sole journalistic contact with the outside world.’<sup>100</sup> Ill with malaria in Spancova field hospital through August 1917, it was a lifeline and Mather equated the newspaper’s temporary suspension with being marooned:

I might as well be stranded on a desert island as here! Left all alone with no mail and no *Balkan News* because of the fire I turn in desperation to *L’Italiano* to amuse myself. I can tell that the Orderly thinks I must be a rum sort of bloke to read that stuff, but what can I do?<sup>101</sup>

Despite being temporarily suspended by the fire, Salonika’s most important English language publication was not going to miss out on reporting the city’s biggest news event, and it provided a detailed account of it:

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<sup>99</sup> Alan Palmer, *The Gardeners of Salonika: The Macedonian Campaign, 1915-1918* (London: faber and faber, 2009), p.145.

<sup>100</sup> William D. Mather, ‘*Muckydonia*’ 1917-1919, p.35.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, p.113.

The Balkan News was printing until well after ten o'clock on Saturday night, but at that time the machinists abandoned the printing press to look after their own affairs. By an extraordinary chance, such as sometimes occurs in great conflagrations, this office remains intact in a region which is completely destroyed. A considerable number of copies of last Sunday's paper, which was being printed on Saturday night while the fire was in the near neighbourhood, are intact and will be put into circulation as soon as possible.<sup>102</sup>

Notwithstanding the destruction caused by the fire and the scarcity of paper, *The Balkan News* was suspended for only a couple of days, and the 22<sup>nd</sup> August number became a collectible item:

A good many people called at the Balkan News offices yesterday to buy the special souvenir number of Aug. 22<sup>nd</sup>. To-day and following days the souvenir will be on sale in Salonica and in the camps in the neighbourhood. To-morrow the paper will be on sale in the camps nearer the front. Occasional badly printed copies should be refused. Further impressions are being taken, and the paper will be obtainable at this office indefinitely.<sup>103</sup>

Cumulatively, *The Balkan News* provides perhaps the single richest information source about Anglophone participant readers in the Macedonian front over 3 years of conflict, and yet

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<sup>102</sup> *The Balkan News*, Number 290, Second Year, 22 August 1917.

<sup>103</sup> *The Balkan News*, Number 295, Second Year, 28 August 1917.

astonishingly, there is no complete extant archive (material or digital) of the full print run of this remarkable publication.

### **Preece's reading**

The fact that the *Balkan News* was read or encountered by almost all the English speaking combatants in the Macedonian front means that it provides a control against which a diversity of other different reading practices and preferences might be mapped. For the budding poet Preece, *The Balkan News* was read alongside serious literature, intermittent tasks of translation from Latin or Greek, and his own writing. Preece's reading experiences at the Macedonian front can be pieced together from three main sources. His correspondence, consisting of 96 manuscript letters home from June 1915 until his death in October 1918, contains sometimes detailed accounts of reading, evaluative judgments, original verse compositions, and requests for books. 31 letters refer to reading, often at length, and usually to multiple texts and authors. He also kept a daily record in his diary. Volume 1 (July-September 1917) , written in pencil on an unlined plain refill pad, offers some references to reading within the context of daily activities, although these are rarely evaluative; the diaries also show much practice of his own prose composition. This Volume has 33 entries referring to his reading (sometimes to multiple texts). Volume 2 (October 1917-May 1918) is similar. 39 entries refer to reading (sometimes to multiple texts, but more often than not, texts are not explicitly identified). Over one hundred evidences of reading of identifiable titles or works can be recovered from the extant papers, and additional information about reading practices and communities can be gleaned from contextual information.

Three examples are illustrative of Preece's diverse reading practices. Befitting his privileged upbringing and desire to be a published poet, Preece's literary tastes were

overwhelmingly high-brow and conservative, but he did sometimes read popular fiction, perhaps against his own judgment; sometimes he even admitted to enjoying it. In May 1918, his mother sent him a copy of Stephen McKenna's high society bestseller, *Sonia: Between Two Worlds* (London: Methuen, 1917), despite his own protestations that (a) he had already read it, and (b) that Summerhill Camp library already possessed a copy. Preece's mother had instructed him to pass on the copy as soon as he had read it, and this he did; just two weeks later, another Summerhill Camp resident, Douglas Harfield, borrowed a copy of *Sonia* from the camp library (Harfield was unequivocal in his praise for the novel).<sup>104</sup> This evidence strongly suggests that books that were in demand (like *Sonia*, which went through 12 editions in its first year) were circulated widely at the front, with a single copy passed from hand to hand, meeting the needs of many readers. The very concentration of potential readers within a small radius of a camp library meant that books were much more likely to be informally shared, borrowed, loaned or read aloud than would have been the case otherwise.

Preece regularly requested that specific books and magazines be sent out to him. These included the *New Statesman*, his old school journal *The Cholmeleian*, books on the list of the *Times Book Club*, and cheap editions of his favourite literary works by Sterne, Thackeray, Meredith, Hardy, and others.<sup>105</sup> Preece was not extraordinary in this sense, for many servicemen asked their family and friends to send them book parcels. Indeed, only through a large scale, systematic investigation of soldiers' requests can we gauge the difference between what soldiers wanted to read, and what they actually read. For much of his time at the Macedonian front, Preece was less than a kilometre away from the camp library, and he made extensive use of it, both to borrow books, and to read material (usually

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<sup>104</sup> Douglas Harfield, *A Diary of the Balkan Front, World War I: 22nd November 1915 to 16th October 1919* (London: Tessa Harfield, 2003), p.169.

<sup>105</sup> Preece, letters dated 9 July 1917; October 1917; November 1917; 22 January 1918; 7 June 1918.

newspapers and magazines) *in situ*.<sup>106</sup> Sometimes he combined both practices, reading periodicals in the camp library and borrowing novels to read later. Summerhill Camp provided Preece with reading as diverse as Conan Doyle's *The White Company*, Chesterton's *The Innocence of Father Brown*, Stanley John Weyman's *The Red Cockade*, short stories by P.G. Wodehouse, magazines such as *Blackwoods*, *Punch*, *Sphere*, *The New Statesman*, and assorted newspapers. Much of the reading material would have been familiar to him in a pre-war context, while other publications were recent bestsellers, or newly issued periodicals and newspapers.

We tend to assume that reading is always determined by immobility: marooned far from home by circumstances beyond their control and separated from easily available sources of reading matter, readers during the First World War must have had their choices constrained, and their appetites for reading blunted by the paucity of available material. This archipelagic vision of readers presents them as isolated from books and textual communities, with only a limited flow of material from centres of production and distribution to combatants on the frontline. However, as Edmund King has shown, even when choices for reading matter were constrained (such as in Mainz prisoner of war camp), readers found ways to maximise their access to (and use of) reading matter, thereby creating and sustaining their own literary culture. But what if First World War readers proved to be rather more static during conflict than in peacetime, and the distance between sites of literary production and consumption rather closer than we had hitherto realised? What if the war had inadvertently created densely clustered communities of immobile readers? Readers of the *Balkan News* all lived within a 50 mile/80km orbit of Salonika, and Preece spent much of his Macedonian campaign less than a mile from the camp library, and just 5 miles away from the newspaper's printing press. Preece's 'book-hunger', I would argue, was one stimulated and not entirely sated by the

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<sup>106</sup> Preece, diary entries dated 26 September 1917; 4 October 1917; 7 October 1917; 6 February 1918.



textually enriched world which he inhabited, while the circumstances of the conflict itself provided the time and inclination to read: a temporary reading space generated by the war, that otherwise, might not have existed.

## **Conclusion (Shafquat Towheed)**

As Francesca Benatti demonstrates, mass digitization brings with it both many opportunities and challenges for the literary researcher interested in the history of reading during the First World War. Edmund King's uncovering of literary reading communities in the prisoner of war camp at Mainz and my exploration of Salonika readers suggest that perhaps many First World War combatant readers were rather more static, and rather closer to established sources of printed matter, than we care to imagine. This hypothesis (that reading material was almost always close to hand) is one that can only be tested by bringing together information from big data sets and closely examining the accounts left by a much larger number of readers. While both case studies have acknowledged that their primary sources and subjects (Kingsmill and Preece) are unrepresentative in terms of class, education, and social background, we cannot know for sure just how unrepresentative (or exceptional) their reading practices may have been without a much larger corpus of evidence against which to compare. By systematically combining quantitative macro-analysis and qualitative micro-analysis and drawing upon the vast amount of newly digitized material, it may be possible to start answering some of the fundamental questions about readers and reading in the First World War.