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Reusing historical questionnaire data and using newly commissioned oral history interviews as evidence in the history of reading

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Abstract:
Interviews, whether freestyle or structured, printed or recorded, offer historians of reading valuable insights into the practices and preferences of individual readers. Despite the potential biases that can be generated by the interview format, the reshaping of memory through the process of retelling, and the questions that can go unasked (and therefore, unanswered), the individual interview can be a richly textured source of information for historians of reading. In this article, three researchers involved in both the recently completed *Reading Communities: Connecting the Past and the Present* project and the ongoing historically focussed *UK Reading Experience Database, 1450-1945* project (UK-RED) examine the ways in which interviews can capture individual records of reading, both in the past and the present.

Keywords: reading, history of reading, reading experiences, memory, oral history, interviews, questionnaires, secondary data

Introduction

Interviews offer historians of reading valuable insights into the practices and preferences of individual (and sometimes groups of) readers from the past to the present. In this article, we explore the ways in which interviews can capture individual records of reading, both in the past and the present.[1] In doing so, we examine some of the central issues relating to questionnaire and interview data: the relationship between the recorded and the remembered, and the synchronic versus diachronic nature of evidence for researchers of reading.

In the first section, Shafquat Towheed provides an overview of some of the historical interview and questionnaire material used as information sources for the evidence of reading gathered in the *UK Reading Experience Database, 1450-1945* project (hereafter cited at *UK-RED*) so far. These include interviews from the Mass Observation project, the work of social historians and journalists (such as Arnold Freeman and Henry Mayhew), newspaper interviews with authors, and prison inspectors' reports. Towheed demonstrates the range and utility of different types of historical interview transcripts for an evidence gathering project such as *UK-RED*, as well as the necessary limitations of such a text based, historically focussed, time delimited project. In the second section, Edmund G. C. King develops further the dialectic between synchronic and diachronic evidence by providing us with a case study of First World War readers. Looking specifically at the Napier Papers, he demonstrates the sometimes corroborating and sometimes contradictory information yielded through interviews with combatants, forms and questionnaires about reading preferences many years later, and compares these to the sometimes vivid accounts of reading in correspondence written during the conflict itself. In doing so, he presents a microhistory of some of the patterns and preferences of British male combatant readers during the conflict, while again interrogating the extent to which recorded evidence and the remembered experience might not always overlap seamlessly. In the final section, Maya Parmar outlines the contemporary (2016) oral history data collection of the *Reading Communities: Connecting the Past and the Present* project (hereafter cited as *Reading Communities*), which benefitted from generating a synchronic record of evidence, whilst utilising a diachronic approach. Using the semi-structured recorded individual interviews with project participants, Parmar explores the complex responses mediated through the individual interviews of a small but diverse group of oral history participants. She draws out some of the recurring strands of collective, familial, and remembered reading, and showcases an example of how reading habits are shaped today, as well as how these cultural practices of reading interplay with subjective identity. Throughout this article, our aim is to demonstrate both the opportunities and the challenges of using questionnaire and interview data for the recovery of reading experiences, as well as to interrogate some of the assumptions of this oft-used, conversational mode of data gathering for researchers in reading cultures.

1. Interviews and questionnaires as source material in the UK Reading Experience Database, 1450-1945, by Shafquat Towheed

Currently the largest single source of collated evidences of reading, *UK-RED* houses some 34,000 records of British readers at home and abroad (and visitors to the British Isles) from 1450 to 1945. As an historically-based and conceptually egalitarian project, where each reader's response to their reading is given equal weight and prominence, *UK-RED* has deliberately drawn upon a wide range of textual sources, many of them previously unpublished, to provide a representative sample of readers' responses (both individual and

collective) through history. Data sources utilised have included memoirs, letters, marginalia in books and manuscripts, journals, diaries, interrogative sources (e.g. court records and prison inspections) and reports. Historical respondent questionnaire and participant interview information has been an essential part of the dataset, especially for the 19th and 20th centuries. A unique feature of *UK-RED* is the extent to which volunteer contributors have discovered and entered data, often from private or unpublished sources, such as family diaries; indeed, some 20% of records in the database were entered by volunteers on the project.

Wherever possible, *UK-RED* has gathered information about readers' responses from existing historical surveys; a major source that was examined at the start of data gathering for the project was the interview-based work of the pioneering journalist and social campaigner Henry Mayhew (1812-87). His well-known study, *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851, revised 1861) and his later investigation of London prisons, *The Criminal Prisons of London and Scenes of Prison Life* (1862) both yield considerable and detailed information about reading practices and preferences, and generated 97 unique records in *UK-RED*, offering valuable insights into the reading tastes of poor and marginalised communities in London in the mid-nineteenth century. Mayhew's approach was interrogative and conversational, and in interviewing members of London's labouring poor (men, women and children), Mayhew placed reading within an individual life story: it is designed as much to humanise individual subjects as to demonstrate the aspiration, solace, diversion and self-assertion of readers' engagements with textual matter, regardless of age, gender or social background. Mayhew's anonymous interview subjects are classified by age, gender, and above all, by occupation. They range from a street buyer of waste paper who reads *Lloyd's Weekly* each Sunday (UK-RED record ID: 1267) to a female crossing sweeper, whose now failing eyesight prevents her from reading past favourites such as *Robinson Crusoe* (UK-RED record ID: 1278), and from a crippled mouse-trapper who in an early example of bibliotherapy, reads Milton's *Paradise Lost* to numb his pain (UK-RED record ID:1282), to the semi-professional blind Braille reader, who earns 2*s* 6*d* a week from reading aloud from the Bible in the street (UK-RED record ID:1285).

Mayhew's interview responses in *London Labour and the London Poor* are mediated and depend on a conversation, rather than the adoption of a formal structured questionnaire, and perhaps owing to the nature of the encounters themselves, could not be easily replicated; he did not undertake follow-up interviews, as would be the case with many contemporary oral history data collection projects, nor did he offer his interview subjects the possibility of reflecting on their reading and responding in writing, via a questionnaire. Indeed, the questionnaire as a form of information gathering for research was still in its infancy, having been first used by the Statistical Society of London (today's Royal Statistical Society) only in 1838. The wider issue of the power differential between interviewer and often vulnerable interviewees remains unresolved in his work, an issue that contemporary researchers of reading cannot avoid. Nevertheless, Mayhew's pioneering journalistic use of interviews as part of a wider social campaign provides invaluable

information for historians of reading, and has since been re-examined with considerable sensitivity and detail by Leah Price (*How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain*, 2012) and John Seed ('Did the Subaltern Speak?', 2014).

If the basic premise of the questionnaire and the interview is to facilitate and record a conversation between interviewer and subject, then it is often the mediated (edited and transcribed) summary report which provides the most usable and easily recoverable information for researchers. In many cases, the original questionnaire responses have not survived. Arnold Freeman's extensive survey of the wartime lives of 816 manual workers (408 men and 408 women) in Sheffield, *The Equipment of the Workers* (1919), is a rich, albeit mediated, source of information about reading, both recreational and auto-didactic, gathered from printed, structured questionnaires which were delivered by volunteers and then collated by Freeman. Information from Freeman's edited and summarised questionnaire responses was entered into *UK-RED*, offering a total of 84 detailed evaluative records of the reading and responses of manual workers in Sheffield during the First World War. These range from the wide-ranging literary reading of an art-school-attending, free-library-using private in an infantry regiment, who enjoyed everything from Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (UK-RED, record ID: 3279) to Scott's *Travels in the Antarctic* (UK-RED, record ID: 3284), to that of a teenage female munitions worker, who read both Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (UK-RED, record ID: 3327) and a textbook on economics (UK-RED, record ID: 3326). Freeman's method was questionnaire rather than interview based; the information gathered was structured but also explicitly directed, and it is also important to stress that investigating reading was not the central focus of his study. Any model of face-to-face interviewing, however tightly structured, would have offered more individual space and agency to the participants to express their own unprompted thoughts and feelings, than the questionnaire model can offer.

This kind of anonymised questionnaire information is particularly valuable for researchers of reading, because for reasons of time, financial investment and habit, manual workers are often less likely to produce diaries, journals and autobiographical memoirs about their reading lives than either professional, middle class readers, or leisured, elite readers. However, as Edwards et al. discuss in their recent work (Edwards et al, 2017), the risk of such an approach, which is dependent on summaries rather than the actual questionnaire responses and associated data capture, is that it misses the sometimes valuable information – the paradata – that either sits outside the structured form, or is recorded alongside it. The method of summarising also fails to capture the individual voice (and therefore agency and self-expression) of participants, potentially diluting the diversity of qualitative responses. A good example of paradata that evades easy capture might be the notes made on the back of the respondent questionnaire form by either the researcher, or the recipient, offering valuable additional contextual information: what status does this paradata have for a systematic exploration of reading practices, for example?

While it was not possible for researchers and volunteers contributing to *UK-RED* to address these more complex methodological issues around the inconsistent structuring of

questionnaire data and the status of paradata, the project has drawn upon a wide range of rich information sources that used interrogative approaches. A good example of this is our use of the Mass Observation Archive from its inception in 1937. *UK-RED* incorporated data from all relevant Mass Observation Online sources up to the end of 1945, including questionnaires, day surveys, participant observers' diaries, directives, commissioned reports, and official Mass Observation publications. Several Mass Observation publications in this period dealt specifically with reading, such as File Report 126 (May 1940), which was a report on the press and its readers, and the topic collections on reading habits (1937-1947), while the rest offered a substantial amount of accidental (or incidental) capture of actual witnessed reading practices. In total, this yielded 395 corroborated, evaluative records of reading; many of these records were self-reported via questionnaires or diaries, while others were participant observation records (effectively surveillance) of readers caught unaware in the act of reading. A good example of the questionnaire approach is an observation survey source used by *UK-RED*, Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings' *May the Twelfth, Mass-Observation Day-Surveys 1937*, which was undertaken by a combination of registered volunteer observers and unsolicited members of the public, and was designed to provide a snapshot overview of everyday life on the day of the coronation of George VI. As part of the day survey, 2000 unsolicited leaflets were distributed on the day, of which 77 (3%) were completed and returned; while none of the six questions on the survey questionnaire were specifically about reading practices, one of the questions on the survey questionnaire – 'What did you do on May 12? Give a *short* hour by hour description of your day' - did certainly encourage the self-reporting on any reading undertaken on the day (Madge & Jennings, 1937, 90). Indeed, *UK-RED* includes some 41 records from 12th May day survey respondents, with timed and located reading experiences ranging from reading *Othello* at home on the morning of the coronation holiday (UK-RED record ID:10061), to reading electric signboards with scrolling text near the Eros Statue in Piccadilly Circus at 1am (UK-RED record ID:10058). This is precisely the kind of information that might not have been recorded for posterity without the means of the day survey questionnaire.

As *UK-RED* gathers text-based, evaluative information with the readers' textual engagement and response at its centre, we have not drawn upon quantitative information drawn from official questionnaires, surveys or interviews. We have not systematically utilised industry focussed interviews with publishers or printers, sources which are often rich in corroborated, quantitative evidence of printing, sales and distribution, but do not always record qualitative, individual readers' responses. Where interviews or questionnaires with individual publishers, printers or booksellers have been used is to uncover the respondents' own, individual responses to their reading, often remembered, mediated and fashioned for posterity. This is still work in progress, and there is much information still to be gathered from such sources.

For reasons of copyright permissions and historical focus, the *UK RED* project only includes evidences of reading up to 1945. This has meant that the project has not made substantial use of emerging twentieth-century technologies, such as recorded audio-visual

material on radio, television, cinema, home movie, or the internet. There are some exceptionally rich audio data sources, based on the standardised, semi-structured interview model, such as the longstanding BBC Desert Island Discs (1942-1946; 1951 to date) which has broadcast over 2800 episodes, that have not yet been systematically exploited by historians of reading. While *Desert Island Discs* is primarily a music programme, the choice (introduced in the late 1950s) of an additional book beyond Shakespeare and the Bible, and the conversational, evaluative context for the choice of an additional book, means that there is a great deal of qualitative information about favourite books here. Similarly, the more conversationally focussed BBC Radio and British Library living oral history partnership The Listening Project (2012 to date; 1143 episodes as of January 2019) records a wealth of anecdotal, unsolicited information about reading practices and preferences.

While it was not plausible for us to utilise sources such as *Desert Island Discs* or *The Listening Project* for *UK-RED*, wherever possible, researchers on the project have made effective use of follow-up individual oral history interviews with subjects who kept written records (usually diaries) of their reading in the period before 1945, and who were willing to be interviewed about their remembered reading. An excellent example of this mixed-methodology is the case study of Hilary Adams (née Spalding), a manufacturer's daughter from County Durham born in 1927, who kept detailed records in the form of an unpublished, hand-written reading diary from 1943 to 1948. There are over 320 records of her reading during World War 2 (specifically, 1943-45) in *UK-RED* entered from her reading diary; in a detailed follow-up oral history interview in 2008 (when Spalding was 81 years old), researcher Katie Halsey gathered another 28 unique records of Spalding's remembered wartime reading, specifically testing to see if experiences she had recorded in her diary at the time were still remembered by her as important more than 60 years later (Halsey, 2011, 88-92). Through the 2008 interview, Halsey found that contrary to expectations, Spalding had no recollection of reading Public Information Leaflets during the war (these had not been mentioned in her diaries written at the time either), suggesting the impact of these now famous leaflets was perhaps less all-pervasive at the time than we might assume today.

The specific case study of Hilary Spalding provides a fascinating example of how researchers might deal with the issue of synchronic versus diachronic evidence, of records of reading registered soon after reading has taken place, versus remembered reading, solicited through questionnaires or oral history interviews. This gap between synchronic and diachronic evidence, between textual records of reading made at the time versus those recalled from memory many years later through interviews, is a central concern in section 2, Edmund King's investigation of First World War readers, and is returned to in section 3, where Maya Parmar demonstrates how semi-structured interviews with contemporary participants about their current reading practices routinely engage with remembered reading. Researchers on the project (see for example, Towheed, 2015) have demonstrated their awareness of how the chronological aspect of reading experiences might be addressed, and this is an area where new technology might offer an answer, by plotting the multiple chronological contexts of reading: the time when the reading or readings take

place; the time represented in the read text; the time when the record or records of reading are constructed or fashioned; and the time between encounters (readings) and responses (records). New digital tools offer the prospect of reusing interview and questionnaire information to offer ever more detailed comparative information about how, where, when and what people in the past read. One such project is the [Reading Europe Advanced Data Investigation Tool (READ-IT)](#) project, which is currently developing a complex data model for examining the experience of reading in both synchronic and diachronic modes.

In the sections that follow, Edmund G. C. King outlines the types of synchronic and diachronic questionnaire information sources (and their limitations) in a microhistory of reading in the First World War, while Maya Parmar outlines the approach and outcomes of contemporary oral history research through individual participant interviews with readers, who often return to their remembered (childhood) reading to structure their individual identities as readers.

2. Diachronic and Synchronic Histories of Reading during the First World War, by Edmund G. C. King

The events of the First World War have produced a vast archive of documentation. During the war itself, each belligerent nation had to quickly develop a sophisticated administrative and communications infrastructure in order to fight. The whereabouts, status, and unit affiliations of millions of men and women needed to be tracked in meticulous detail. Orders and intelligence had to be conveyed from headquarters to the frontlines. The forces mobilised by the war depended upon a continuous inflow of material goods to maintain their effectiveness. Weapons and ammunition, building supplies, fuel, boots and clothing, food and water were shipped across the world, and each of these shipments needed to be accounted for. An article in the *Daily Mail* describes the scale of the bureaucratic system that arose in response to these demands. Up until June 1915, it reported, the Army Stationery Services had provided British forces with:

> 52 million field service postcards, printed in English, Hindu [sic], Urdu, and Gurmukhi … nearly 100 million Army message forms, 7 million message envelopes, 2 million War Diaries and Intelligence Summary of Events (for Army record purposes), and 30 and 35 million respectively of two different types of Army form. (Anon 1915, 7)

In addition to this, the *Mail* reported that there were over 700 different types of Army Form in current use, as well as 21 kinds of pencil, 26 classes of ink, and over 1000 Army typewriters 'in the field' that Army clerks and soldiers could use to fill them in.

This burgeoning system of official Army paperwork was accompanied by a corresponding body of personal documentation, one produced by soldiers and their families. As Alice Kelly has observed, the necessity of letter writing was often remarked

upon in the British popular press during the war. Journalists and opinion writers represented the act of writing to soldiers as a form of patriotic and familial duty for those on the home front (Kelly 2017, 80). The physical separations of war compelled many who may have only written the occasional letter before to become regular correspondents, resulting in an unprecedented demand for writing paper and envelopes (McLaurin 1916, 3). Between 1915 and 1918, the British Post Office's specially constructed Regent's Park depot handled on its own over 2 billion letters and 114,000,000 parcels (Towheed and King 2015, 11). Personal diaries, too, were aggressively marketed at soldiers and their families by the stationery industry through shop displays and advertisements placed in the popular press. This mixture of social need and commercial enterprise led to the creation of a huge archive of wartime personal documentation, one that casts a unique light on the everyday lives of countless people which, but for the war, may otherwise never have been recorded.

In the century since the Armistice, this documentary archive has continued to grow. Successive 'memory booms' have encouraged the creation of different classes of record.[2] Inspired by the 'war books boom' of the late 1920s and early 1930s, many former soldiers wrote retrospective accounts of their experiences, the vast majority of which remained unpublished. Starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s, military and oral historians circulated questionnaires among, and conducted interviews with, surviving wartime witnesses (Thomson 2006, 2; McDonald 2008, 138). Finally, in the 'memory boom' of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the families of veterans have taken up the mantle of the war experience. Enabled by the mass digitisation of war records and the rise of online genealogical resources like Ancestry.com and Find My Past, family history researchers have sought to piece together the wartime experiences of their ancestors (Wallis 2015, 26–28). Another significant phenomenon associated with the most recent memory boom has been the publication of a large number of soldiers' diaries, letters, and memoirs, often edited or overseen by family members or descendants.

The multifaceted body of records these processes have created is a rich potential source of evidence for anyone researching reading practices during the First World War. However, detailed examination of different sorts of record reveals that evidence about reading is distributed unevenly across the archive. Reading is recorded as haphazardly in surviving war diaries as in personal diaries generally, although in each case it is unwise to assume that a lack of specific entry necessarily indicates a lack of reading (Crone, Halsey and Towheed 2010, 31–2). Even those that do record reading may refer to it in general terms, without reference to titles or the nature of the text being read (cf. King 2014, 238). Interviews with and questionnaires completed by former soldiers can also be problematic sources for the reading historian. Former British prisoners of war, for instance, were interviewed about their experiences in captivity when they escaped or were repatriated. Transcripts and summaries of these interviews have been retained in a number of official archives. Even though reading was a relatively common occupation in prisoner-of-war camp, repatriation statements tend not to mention reading or prison libraries (King 2015, 157–8). These interviews focused instead on instances of maltreatment, the circumstances under

which individual soldiers surrendered, and the adequacy of food and parcel supply in particular camps.

Mining historical questionnaire data for information about First World War reading practices can be similarly problematic. In the mid-1970s, while at Sandhurst, the military historian Keith Simpson designed a lengthy and detailed questionnaire for former First World War British officers, asking them about their experiences. Question 36 on the form asked: 'What did you and your fellow officers read and talk about during the war?' In September 1976, a copy of the questionnaire was sent to Sir Joseph Napier, 4th Baronet (1895–1986), who had served as a Second Lieutenant in the South Wales Borderers and was captured in Iraq in April 1917. The completed questionnaire is now among a deposit of Napier's First World War papers in the Liddle Collection at the University of Leeds. In a memo accompanying his responses, Napier cautioned Simpson that 60 years had gone by since the events he was being asked to recollect. His response to question 36 was, 'It is an awful long time ago, I hardly remember – 60 years – we didn't read much, as there were few, if any, books: probably food was a good topic' (Napier 1976, 8). Deposited alongside the completed questionnaire, however, is a collection of the letters Napier wrote to his family while he was a prisoner in Turkey in 1917–8. The survival of these letters provides an opportunity to compare the diachronic source material in the completed questionnaire with synchronic evidence produced by Napier during the war itself. A comparison of the two sources complicates Napier's later recollections of a relatively bookless war. Writing from the officers' prisoner-of-war camp in what was then the village of Kedos on 1 October 1917, Napier told his mother that a prisoner-colleague had just received a parcel of books, which had come 'quite quickly'. Accordingly, he asked her to send him a selection of books via W. H. Smith's: *Gulliver's Travels*, *Sketches by Boz*, Thackeray's *Book of Snobs*, H. G. Wells' *Kipps*, and 'as many other good books as you can think of', specifying that all should be Everyman reprint editions (Napier to 'Mater', 1 October 1917). During the first half of 1918, Napier's letters show that he read H. G. Wells' *New Machiavelli*, 'loved' Rudyard Kipling's *Barrack Room Ballads* and *Departmental Ditties*, and diligently worked his way through several titles by Arnold Bennett and E. F. Benson (Napier to 'Mater', 18 February 1918, 14 March 1918, 20 May 1918).

Napier's wartime letters also complicate his suggestion that the reason soldiers may not have 'read much' was necessarily because there were 'few, if any, books'. The picture that emerges from his letters of Kedos by early 1918 is one of a thriving, if improvised, cultural community with a substantial stock of books, which was periodically refreshed by book parcels from Britain.[3] It is a mistake to assume that particular First World War locations, even isolated spots such as Kedos, were necessarily 'bookless wildernesses' and that potential readers there were starved of books (Towheed, Benatti, and King 2015, 255–6). Indeed, evidence from the letters suggests that it was perhaps an oversupply of reading material, coupled with Napier's own preferences, which had led him at times to not 'read much'. 'Reading after a time becomes rather monotonous', he admitted to his mother in late 1917, observing that he had become especially tired of reading novels (Napier to

'Mater', 5 November 1917). Competition from other forms of recreational activity in the relatively benign captive environment in Kedos was also a factor. After being granted parole by camp authorities in November 1917, Napier told his family that he was now spending most of his time walking in the hills around the camp. 'I'm feeling ever so much fitter for it all', he wrote, 'and now find no time for reading etc. In fact I haven't opened a book since getting parole' (Napier to 'Mater', 29 November 1917).

The disparity between these two forms of evidence, one produced from memory 60 years after events, the other while the events themselves were still ongoing, illustrates some of the limitations and interpretive difficulties involved in using historical questionnaires as evidence for reading. Even when relevant questions are asked, they will not necessarily produce the answers anticipated. Silences and apparent instances of non-reading also have to be interpreted carefully. The complex and occasionally contradictory evidence supplied by Napier's letters and questionnaire responses suggests several overlapping possibilities for why he answered question 36 in the way he did. Perhaps it was indeed due to the passage of time that he overlooked his prisoner-of-war reading experiences in Turkey. Perhaps he assumed that Simpson's question related to active-service reading only, and that POW reading was off-topic. The ambivalent attitude towards wartime reading suggested by his letters, however – particularly one where he remarks that 'this reading is a strange thing for me', and that he had little inclination for books before the war (Napier to 'Mater', 18 February 1918) – suggests another possibility. He may simply have regarded reading as a relatively unimportant aspect of his war experience.

The Napier papers provide an instance of how synchronic evidence can be used to interpret or problematize the information in diachronic questionnaire data. To what extent, however, is it possible to work the other way, using interviews or questionnaires to disrupt or call into question the information about reading practices contained in historical source material? Another set of sources drawn from the archive of the British prisoner of war experience might provide an example. During the First World War, a dedicated charity, the British Prisoners of War Book Scheme (Educational), was established to send technical and educational books to British and Commonwealth prisoners of war and internees (King 2013, 251–4). The Scheme's founder, the Welsh educationalist Alfred T. Davies, wanted it to operate like a personal reference library service. For the Scheme to gain traction with prisoners, he wrote in a post-war memoir, it 'seemed essential … that every man should get precisely the books he wanted' (Davies 1940, 72). Publicity material for the Scheme foregrounded the plight of the bookless prisoner of war and explained how access to reading material might alleviate prisoners' mental suffering. In a 1917 pamphlet, Davies asked:

> can those of us at home, to whom books are as the breath of life, imagine what
> it must be to have days and months of time in enforced inactivity and never a
> line to read? Can we picture to ourselves the state of the energetic young man,
> working hard to rise in his calling, leaving the books and classes, on which

depended all his hopes, in order to join the colours, and now condemned to eat
his heart out … in some far-distant Camp, surrounded only by the enemies of
his country? In such circumstances, what a priceless boon books must be!
(Davies 1917, 17)

As Davies' pamphlet suggests, the British Prisoners of War Book Scheme was designed
primarily for prisoners who had been part-way through university or professional courses of
study when they joined up, a rather select group that would have been disproportionately
composed of officers. Providing books for autodidacts or general readers was only a
secondary concern, though one which the Scheme attempted to cater for when possible
(Koch 1917, 36–7). A second book charity, the Camps' Library, sent more 'general' reading
material to prisoner of war camps. Camps' Library publicity represented books as a 'means
of recreation or amusement' for prisoners of war and a way of 'cheer[ing] a little their hours
of imprisonment' ('Camps' Library' 1918, 102). Despite their different aims, the publicity
produced by both charities suggested that books occupied a special position in the prisoner
of war experience, either as mental lifelines, a means of self-improvement, or as simply a
way of combatting boredom or 'homesickness' (102).

　　To what extent does 'diachronic' evidence provided by former prisoners of war
accord with the publicity produced by wartime book charities? Did ordinary prisoners also
feel the outsized importance of the book in their 'far-distant Camps' and benefit from the
activities of POW Book Scheme and the Camps' Library? Starting in January 1999, the writer,
broadcaster and popular historian Richard van Emden embarked on a mission to contact
and interview as many surviving former First World War British prisoners of war as he could.
He ultimately located 19 surviving POWs over the course of the project, of whom 9 were
available to be interviewed. A further survivor, George Gadsby, provided Emden with a
memoir he had written shortly after returning home (Emden 2000, 11). Emden's research
resulted in a Channel 4 documentary and a tie-in book, *Prisoners of the Kaiser: The Last
POWs of the Great War* (2000), which contains what are ostensibly extracts from the
interview transcripts arranged according to topic.[4] Nowhere in the book do any of Emden's
interviewees mention having access to reading material during their captivity. The only
reference to prisoner of war camp libraries occurs in a list of typical camp amenities
provided by Emden himself (81). The sole reference to reading in the transcripts comes after
the war, when former Royal Army Medical Corps Private William Easton remembers that he
'used to do a lot of reading' in the period immediately after his release in 1919 (206). The
only other references to reading materials in the book relate to specific instances of non-
reading, such as when former Private Percy Williams remembers not hearing about the
Armistice for several days due to the fact that there were 'no newspapers' in his hospital
ward in Bremen (164).

　　How do we interpret this apparent absence? Is it truly evidence that book charities
like the POW Book Scheme had little or no reach in the camps, or might there be other
factors at play? The most obvious point to make is that the distance between the synchronic

and the diachronic in *Prisoners of the Kaiser* is at the extreme end of the scale. The former prisoners would have been aged between 101 and 106 when the book was published in 2000 and indeed 14 of the original 19 contactees had by that time died. Although Emden is at some pains to assert that the memories of the men he had interviewed remained 'remarkable' (11), the passage of time is undeniably a factor in both what they remembered and in the stories they chose to tell. As Alistair Thomson points out, the narratives elicited in oral history interviews are by no means straightforward windows onto the past. They are instead constructed narratives, which are often perfected over repeated retellings and told in different ways according to audience (Thomson 2006, 26–7). Public mythologies and popular understandings of the war encountered and internalised in the intervening years also influenced the way in which First World War veterans talked about their experiences (Trott 2013, 340; Thomson 2015, 21–2; 24). By the time of the late twentieth-century 'memory booms', the figure of the 'soldier reader' present in wartime publicity and journalism had retreated from public memory, replaced by other conceptions of what soldiering had been like.[5]

The most important factor in interpreting the testimony in *Prisoners of the Kaiser*, however, is the composition of the book's interview sample. Temporal and practical constraints meant that Emden necessarily had to focus on a particular subset of former POWs. By the time the project started, all of the surviving prisoners captured in 1914 and 1915 were dead (Emden 2000, 14). Although he lists two former officer-prisoners among the 19 men initially located, both apparently died before they could be interviewed (7). Of the ten final contributors to the book, only two were captured earlier than 1918.[6] The others entered captivity either in the German Spring Offensive (March–May 1918) or during the Allied push towards Germany in the final months of the war. None of the interview subjects held a wartime rank higher than Corporal; 80% of them were Privates. Emden was certainly aware of the biases in his interview sample, writing that 'the book does not claim to cover all aspects of the prisoner of war experience' and lamenting the lack of officer-interviewees in particular (14). Nevertheless, his Introduction minimises the importance of this sample bias by asserting – somewhat unconvincingly – that the classes of experience described in the book were somehow timeless and independent of rank or context:

> Powerful recollections of capture or escape are more important than to whom, where, or in what year they occurred. For a man standing with a bayonet tip at his stomach, or an escapee dashing across a field at night, there is a primitive fear regardless of whether he wears pips on his shoulders or stripes on his arm. (14)

As neat a solution as this is rhetorically, it seriously understates the diversities in the prisoner of war experience brought about by precisely the variables – rank; location; and date of capture – whose importance Emden here seeks to minimise. The commonalities in rank and date of capture among the book's interview subjects cannot be so easily dismissed.

They may indeed have had an impact on the kinds of stories they were able to tell and the kinds of captive reading experiences it was possible for them to have.

By 1918, when most of the interviewees in *Prisoners of the Kaiser* were captured, the conditions under which ordinary-ranking British, French, and German prisoners of war were held had deteriorated significantly. Captor nations were permitted to employ lower-ranking prisoners of war in non-war-related occupations under the Hague Convention of 1907. (Officers and senior NCOs were exempt from work.) In practice, however, given the labour market pressures and production problems that the war gave rise to, POWs were swiftly converted into a source of forced labour. In Germany and Austria-Hungary in particular, POW labour became central to the war economy. By the time of the Armistice, 90% of the prisoners in German captivity were involved in forced labour (Kramer 2010, 78). In addition to this, diplomatic disputes over POW treatment had led to a series of mutual reprisals against prisoner populations. In 1917 and 1918, German authorities employed British and French POWs in deliberately dangerous conditions behind the front lines, where they were exposed to shellfire, disease, and starvation; thousands died. Violence, maltreatment, and food shortages among these working parties escalated in the administrative chaos that reigned during the final months of the war (Jones 2011, 210–7; 248–9). Many of the men captured in the German Spring Offensive – and a substantial proportion of the interviewees in *Prisoner of the Kaiser* – were taken directly into labour companies operating behind the German lines and had no access to basic relief supplies (such as Red Cross parcels), let alone the libraries and other recreational facilities to be found in the main camp system.

Locating a specific set of contexts for the interview data can help provide a framework for interpreting them. While it would be unwise to draw general conclusions about the entire British prisoner of war experience on this basis, the apparent lack of opportunities for reading reported by this sample of men can certainly tell us something about the conditions under which POWs captured in the final months of the war were held. The anecdotes about POW labour and lack of access to recreational facilities shared by most of the interviewees show how incorrect the POW Book Scheme's assumption that the prisoners' largest problem would be coping with 'enforced inactivity' was. This situation applied generally only to officers and other men exempt from work. The kinds of captive reading experiences available to Second Lieutenant Joseph Napier were, in practice, often the reserve of a relatively small elite, one protected by the privileges afforded by rank and social class. On a larger level, the two case studies examined here show how diachronic interview and questionnaire data can be combined with synchronic evidence – contemporary letters, in the case of Napier; historical context, in the case of Emden's interview subjects – in order to assess their veracity. Conversely, diachronic evidence can be used to examine the claims made in synchronic sources, such as the publicity issued by wartime book charities. Apparent instances of non-reading in the archive should not simply be dismissed by reading historians. Interpreted carefully, they can reveal a good deal of information about the place of reading in particular social, temporal, and geographic contexts, revealing, in the widest sense, what it was that reading meant to individual

readers. As my examination of the gap between recorded synchronic and remembered diachronic evidences of reading demonstrates, no one approach is entirely sufficient to tell the full stories of individual readers or groups of readers. As the next section by Maya Parmar demonstrates, even a contemporary, oral history interview based project with living subject must contend with the weight of remembered reading in shaping actual and continued readerly engagement.

3. 'Reading Communities', Reading Identities, by Maya Parmar

In this final section, I take contemporary readers as my focus, drawing upon and explicating the oral history data collection methodologies incorporated into the project *Reading Communities*. *Reading Communities* was an Open University led, Arts and Humanities Research Council funded public-engagement project (2015-2016), developed out of, and following on from, *UK-RED*. Its aim was to build upon and extend the remit of *UK-RED* through explicit engagement with present-day public readers, on the theme of their contemporary cultural practices of reading. Through workshops and interactive events in five UK cities, participants, with the project team, explored how contemporary practices of reading compared and contrasted with the historical reading accounts captured in *UK-RED*. As part of the umbrella activities of *Reading Communities,* I led a programme of oral history interviews, with participants from Belfast, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Liverpool, and London (2016), from which ten oral testimonies were obtained.[7]

The semi-structured recorded individual interviews focused on various reading practices, including habitual reading, heritage reading, family reading, and broader memories, experiences and habits of reading. The questions, as exemplified below, were expressly designed to elicit memories of reading, from 'readers'. Those who participated enjoyed reading and perceived the activity as a productive and fulfilling part of their life, now and historically. I contend later that implicitly this model of oral history participation and interaction is weighted against other experiences of reading. In my scrutiny of these testimonies, I also explore what forms of identity are shaped through the cultural practice of reading. In particular I am interested in the utility of oral history methodology in mediating contemporary reading practices, and their positionality in framing individuated forms of identity. What forms of identity are narrated through reading practices, and how do reading habits interplay with subjective identity, as expressed during the oral history interviews? How can these forms of evidence be at once diachronic and synchronic?

Before addressing these curiosities, let us consider in detail the interview strand of *Reading Communities*. Designed to harness the potential of oral history methodology, *Reading Communities* aimed to capture individual records of contemporary reading habits and customs, from a small sample of diverse participants around the UK. From these individuated instances of reading experience, the research team sought to collect memories of reading from participants, establishing whether any collectivities of shared reading practices, or reading communities, became apparent. Interviews were conducted both face-to-face, and over the phone, and recorded to enable transcription latterly. Participants were

offered a take home 'Information Sheet', outlining the purpose of the study, organiser information with contact details, and direction on how to withdraw from the research post-interview. Via a 'Recording Agreement' all participants gave consent for the interviews, as well as for the subsequent use of the material as research data.

The semi-structured interviews began with an open-ended, descriptive question regarding reading habits during daily routines, as well as the significance and prominence of the participant's everyday reading habits. This first question was designed to elicit a descriptive answer from participants about their memories of reading, to encourage them, whilst beginning their thinking on the topic and establish rapport. It was formulated along the trajectory of: 'can you describe what importance reading has to you, or where it might fit within your daily routine?' Latter questions became more specific and focussed upon the themes at hand, and included: 'What was your favourite childhood book?'; 'what did your parents or grandparents read to you?'; 'how have your reading practices changed over the years?'. The interview questions were attentive and adaptive to the flow of the conversation, and thus largely participant led.

The small sample of readers interviewed was diverse: equal numbers of men and women participated, some had tertiary education, others did not, participants came from around the UK, ranged in age from thirty to ninety, and several had experiences of international and national migration personally, or amongst their family network. For many of the participant readers this was the first time they had contributed to an oral history activity, and certainly none had been interviewed in a formalised setting on the topic of their reading practices. They were enthusiastic contributors, and had often, in advance of the interviews, privately meditated upon their reading habits. A range of responses were offered by individuals, resulting in some collective overlaps, yet also the expression of divergent experiences. Whilst the questions largely revolved around the same key themes in each interview, certain topics emerged as more significant. These recurring themes included: reading and technology; gendered reading traditions; reading and professional life; wartime reading and writing; as well as reading and identity.

It is the relationship between contemporary reading and new reading technologies that I focus upon here.[8] The place and usage of burgeoning and widespread portable electronic reading devices amongst our participants' reading repertoire was raised time and time again. For example, one of our participants referred to the Amazon Kindle on several occasions. Indeed, she mentions the 'Kindle' a surprising sixteen times on separate occasions, in an interview of less than an hour. Within the first minute of the interview she brings up the device of her own accord, eager to share her own reading habits on the e-reader. She later discloses the Kindle reading inclinations of her daughter and husband. The advent and proliferation of electronic reading devices has a clear and marked impact on this participant's reading habits. Moreover, the practice is an expression of a reading identity entangled with her subjective identity. When asked about her reading habits, the participant explained:

> And I don't think what I read basically has changed. (Pause) Maybe it's a bit
> more, I've gone back to the classics a bit because of having a Kindle you can get
> the classics which are out of copyright, free.[…] I've gone back to the likes of
> Dickens and you know reading a couple of Dickens which I wasn't really fond of
> Dickens when I was younger – you know I like them on television and I think
> they were written to be serialised and I think the whole book is a bit – but I
> quite enjoyed them on – yeah – I quite enjoyed them on the Kindle. (Anon,
> *Reading Communities* project, 26 October 2016)

In this diachronic report of reading habits, the participant initially suggests that her practices have not really changed over the years, and through retirement; however, on reflection, asserts that she now reads more classics. Interestingly, her early diachronic reflection moves into a synchronic report. Here we see that synchronic and diachronic reports of reading are not always separable, but coalesce in life stories, drawing past reading into the present. The classics she refers to of the past and the present include Dickens. She later states that as a school child she read Dickens begrudgingly and without enjoyment. Yet now she has returned to this reading inclination, owing to changes in availability, cost, and media exposure. Many classics are free to download, owing to copyright reasons. Copyright law tends to be inherently restrictive for the end user, in this case vis-à-vis the cost associated with purchasing that copyrighted material. In the UK at least, copyright remains intact for seventy years after the producer dies: in this case seventy years after the author deceases. Once this period passes, works are no longer subject to copyright protection, and they can subsequently be produced cheaply in the digital format. Once copyright is removed, in the case of book material, it becomes apparent that the increased availability and lower costs on reading devices, shape reading habits.

Here we have an example of the way in which reading technologies are shaping reading habits. Because of how classic books can become widely available to the end user via electronic reading devices for little, or no, cost, there is a skew in reading preferences. Historically, this is not the only instance whereby out-of-copyright reading material has enjoyed an increase in exposure. Similarly, the repeal of the Net Book Agreement in the early nineteen-nineties and the release of £1 classic editions in paperback by, for example, Penguin Popular Classics and Wordsworth, encouraged renewed public consumption of 'classic' fiction. However, the introduction of the e-reader into this participant's reading repertoire, is closely entangled with an expression of subjective identity. During the interview, the participant draws attention to her working-class roots. She does so through a number of descriptions, including: of the Liverpudlian two-up and two-down terrace she grew up in; her mother's occupation -- 'she worked part time as a cleaner in the morning and I think she was a bar maid in the afternoon while we were at school'; as well as plainly stating 'I was brought up in a working-class home' (Anon, *Reading Communities* project, 26 October 2016). This working-class self-identification is narrated through the participant's reading practices, as well as intergenerational reading legacies. She told me:

> […] me mum liked all the Catherine Cookson and all the Liverpool authors, and I
> enjoyed those as well but I wouldn't read them now as I say I enjoyed them but
> as I say my mum related to the stories of poverty etcetera and how Liverpool
> was when she was brought up so she used to enjoy those. (*Ibid.*)

Earlier in her married life, the participant's reading practices mirrored those preferences of her mother's, and these stemmed from an interest in consuming that which fictionally reflected their own class reality. This is later linked by the participant with the necessity of consuming 'very cheap' books, as a child. The cost of reading material plays a significant role in her reading habits. Whilst the local library might have presented the most cost-effective option to acquire reading material, the participant explains that they did not often stock the selection of books the family wanted. Subsequently they chose to buy books as cheaply as possible: the quality of book where the paper 'yellowed after a while' (Anon, *Reading Communities* project, 26 October 2016). Purchasing books economically, rather than using the libraries, was incorporated into the family's collective reading repertoire.

Paradoxically, the participant was a librarian, for 17 years, before retirement, yet she reveals, to her embarrassment, she still does not visit libraries to borrow books to this day. Her training in librarianship came after a college course later in life, in her early forties, and was a pragmatic decision, rather than based primarily on the pleasure derived from being a book lover. She explains that some of her peers studied 'history and literature', but despite her own love of reading, she wanted to invest her time practically. Her librarian employment subsequently revolved around reference work, within the education sector, and she explains that: 'I wouldn't say being a librarian made me any more fond of reading than I already was I think, right from a child I always read!' (*Ibid.*). Libraries do not thus form part of this participant's reading repertoire or custom: they are instead a practical tool in professional attainment. In her contemporary practice, the participant prefers the convenience of Kindle reading, and the fact that material can be free. The library is conceived of as inconvenient, and costly, if we account for late returns, as the participant does. There is a reading persuasion towards thrifty consumerism, which springs from the participant's childhood, and self-identification as working-class. Entangled in her contemporary reading practice is her childhood class identity. Her reading habits today embed her roots, vis-a-vis the functionality and utility of the Kindle, which offers free reading material, at a convenience.

Having closely read one participant's experiences of reading, and the subsequent relationship to individuated identity, we should reflect upon a negotiation inherent in this analysis. The participant's narration relies upon her memory, as does my subsequent analysis. It is widely acknowledged that memory is slippery and unstable, constructed and reconstructed, in a continual unfolding process. What is more, '[t]he borders of memory and identity are jagged', as Michael Rothberg suggests, 'what looks at first like my own property often turns out to be a borrowing or adaptation from a history that initially might seem

foreign or distant' (2009, 5). This uneven quality of memory is highlighted elsewhere in the article. We might thus suppose that we are learning not so much about history in these oral 'history' testimonies, but more about personal identities and formulations of selfhood, as mediated through individual recorded remembrance.[9] Nevertheless, the relationship between history, identity and memory remains porous, and these are constructive intersections to probe.

More broadly, a second boundary of the work presented here relates to the structure and design of this strand of *Reading Communities*, and its use of oral testimony. The project attracted participants who self-identified as 'readers', and without fail had a love for books and reading. Often this passion was entrenched in familial practices of intergenerational reading, and/or a developed education profile. However, given the project purview, scope and length, we were unable to access other types of adult readers, including those at the margins of society, those who had a less developed competency of reading, or those who simply just did not self-identify as 'readers'. Of course, many of these individuals are 'readers', but have formed a different, sometimes fraught, relationship with the cultural practice. These are individuals who would therefore not naturally put themselves forward for an activity around reading practices. Furthermore, the framework of oral history interviews makes for an exposing and vulnerable experience: one that might not be attuned to explorations of cultural practices with which the participant is ambivalent or uncomfortable.

By way of example, the project was involved with the community non-profit project 'streetreads', which gives away books to homeless readers in Edinburgh. During our 'Edinburgh: A City of Readers' event in November 2016, the project team collaborated with 'streetreads' to facilitate a book donation. We collected around fifty paperback copies of books that had been specifically requested by homeless readers; these were then distributed to those individual readers across Edinburgh. The homeless network brought together by 'streetreads' are voracious and discerning readers; however, given their positionality on the margins of society, their subsequent vulnerability and suspicion of any sort of authority, we were unable to include them in our oral history study. Of course, this is not the only group missing from our participant demographic. We might thus ask: what reading identities are hidden through this method of oral history research; what forms of cultural practices cannot be captured; how can we access those who are at the margins of society, vulnerable, or perhaps do not self-identify as readers? Oral history methodology thus is limited in collecting evidence about reading habits. What the oral history strand of *Reading Communities* does achieve lies in its merits in building upon the well-established, but time-limited, *UK-RED*. The latter project begins to bring up-to-date and into the present-day accounts of reading experiences, as instituted by *UK-RED*, which stretches to 1945. *Reading Communities* contributes to and develops *UK-RED*, offering reports of reading that are at once diachronic and synchronic, drawing historical reading practices into the present.

Conclusion

For those researching reading from a range of disciplinary perspectives, the interview (in both historical contexts and contemporary practice) is the most paradoxical of sources: at once too rich, and yet sometimes, not rich enough. Key questions might go unanswered, or interview subjects might feel pressured into providing a response – any response – rather than a considered, evaluative answer. While the interview might construct a conversation, it might not always deliver precise enough information about actual reading experiences, making the necessity of following up via a second interview, or through a questionnaire, or yet another mode of data capture, an important part of research practice. Reusing historical questionnaires as interrogative sources for the history of reading can be highly productive, as Shafquat Towheed has shown in this article, but it is not entirely unproblematic. On one hand, questionnaires can offer too much information, with a proliferation of non-standardised fields, categories and modes of recording responses. On the other, there is the inherent limitation of the form; as Edmund G. C. King has demonstrated, what is left off the questionnaire is often as important as what is on it, and recent research in paradata, such as that by Edwards et al (2017) has demonstrated the importance of recognising this kind of information capture outside the framework of the questionnaire itself. As Jackson, Smith and Olive (2008) cogently note in their analysis of the re-use of historical data from three major sources (The Edwardians; 100 Families; Millennium Memory Bank), the 'practicalities, epistemologies and ethics' (Jackson, Smith & Olive 2008, 2) of re-using historical data must be considered equally, and attention given to the context, value and authority of field notes gathered by the original interviewers. This can mean that in the reuse of historical questionnaire information whether in summary or in total, the actual signal-to-noise ratio is higher than expected.

The very nature of published historical interview material and questionnaire information, which implicitly or explicitly showcases its various mediations through hierarchies of power, means that recorded responses are very far from neutral: however empathetic an interviewer Henry Mayhew might have been, for example, could not detract from the multiple inequalities of power that separated him from his subjects. As Maya Parmar shows, these issues of inequalities of power recurred in relation to the *Reading Communities* project team's potential engagement with the participant beneficiaries of the 'streetreads' project. Multi- and interdisciplinary research in the humanities and social sciences cannot be silent on this issue and we have a duty as ethical researchers to acknowledge these inequalities whenever we see them. Finally, as we have demonstrated in this article, reading as a social practice leaves behind both a synchronic and a diachronic data trail, and is mediated through individual (and sometimes collective) memory. No scholar of the history of reading can afford to ignore the extent to which memory continues to shape recorded evidence, both during (and after) the point of capture. However, these constraints should never discourage us from making even greater use of the rich seams of information about readers' responses, as well as the contexts for reading as a social practice, recorded through interviews and questionnaires.

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[2] On the phenomenon of the 'memory boom', see Winter 2001 and Bell 2003.

[3] On conditions for officers at Kedos, see Ariotti 2018, 66–7.

[4] 'Prisoners of the Kaiser' was first broadcast in Britain on 31 August 2000, in series 8 of the Channel 4 documentary series, *Secret History*.

[5] On the place of the 'soldier-reader' in First World War British journalism and book-trade publicity, see Towheed and King 2015.

[6] These men were Private Thomas Gay, captured at Guillemont during the Battle of the Somme in 1916 and Private Thomas Spriggs, captured during the Battle of Cambrai on 30 November 1917.

[7] Participants were often attendees of the public engagement for impact workshop and event programme of *Reading Communities.* They were subsequently invited or volunteered to take part in the oral history strand.

[8] Whilst recent scholarly interest in contemporary reading practices exists (Collinson 2009; Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 2013; as well as the AHRC-funded 'Memories of Fiction: An Oral History' project), the impact of the digital turn upon how we read today has also occupied researchers in literary and linguistic studies, as well as the field of education. The way in which contemporary reading practices

have been influenced, whether enhanced or threatened, by everyday technologies has been the subject of intense debate, see Birkerts 1996; Mangen 2010; Rose 2010; Simpson, Walsh and Rowsell 2013; Rowsell 2014.

[9] The eminent oral history scholar Alessandro Portelli explores the utility of oral history, its distinguishing factors, and the challenges it has faced from its critics. He has outlined 'the tensions in oral history as a *social* methodology based on *personal* accounts' (2018, 240), and the 'problems and possibilities of oral history' (2018, 239). See also: Portelli, 2016.