The Edinburgh History of Reading
Series Editor: Mary Hammond

Reveals the experience of reading in many cultures and across the ages

Bringing together the latest scholarship from all over the world on topics ranging from reading practices in ancient China to the workings of the twenty-first-century reading brain, the 4 volumes of the Edinburgh History of Reading demonstrate that reading is a deeply imbricated, socio-political practice, at once personal and public, defiant and obedient. It is often materially ephemeral, but it can also be emotionally and intellectually enduring.

Common Readers casts a fascinating light on the literary experiences of ordinary people: miners in Scotland, churchgoers in Victorian London, workers in Czarist Russia, schoolgirls in rural Australia, farmers in Republican China, and forward to today’s online book discussion groups. Chapters in this volume explore what they read, and how books changed their lives.

Jonathan Rose is William R. Kenan Professor of History at Drew University.

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The Edinburgh History of Reading: Common Readers
THE EDINBURGH HISTORY OF READING

*General Editors: Mary Hammond and Jonathan Rose*

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*Early Readers*, edited by Mary Hammond  
*Modern Readers*, edited by Mary Hammond  
*Common Readers*, edited by Jonathan Rose  
*Subversive Readers*, edited by Jonathan Rose
The Edinburgh History of Reading: Common Readers

Edited by Jonathan Rose
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Introduction

Jonathan Rose

It really all began with Richard Altick. In *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900* (1957), he sketched in the agenda of what would later be known as ‘the history of the book’.¹ This grand project would bring together research on literacy, basic education, libraries, the book business, newspapers and periodicals, and situate it all in the social and cultural milieu of the times. (Altick was actually one step ahead of the volume that is often credited with launching book history, *L’ apparition du livre*, which Lucien Febvre and Henri Jean Martin published in 1958.)

Although Samuel Johnson invented the term and the concept, it was Altick who wonderfully focused the minds of historians on the ‘common reader’. Tracking the literary tastes of authors, intellectuals, divines and statesmen was relatively easy, but as for the untold millions of ordinary readers – those who read not for professional reasons, but for pleasure and edification – what paper trails did they leave behind? Could we ever hope to enter into their minds and recapture reading as they experienced it? Scarcity of sources was an obstacle to Altick, who in fact devoted only one chapter of his book to ‘The Self-Made Reader’. But since 1957 scholars have discovered ingenious ways to approach the subject and to recover what once seemed to be hopelessly lost to history. The case studies in the present volume make clear that we have advanced very far and in many directions since *The English Common Reader*. Much of that research has focused on Britain, if only because England and especially Scotland were early achievers of mass literacy, and both left behind rich documentary evidence of everyday reading. But this volume also offers pioneering research on Russia, China and isolated Australasian and New Zealand farmsteads.

Commonplace books have long been used by scholars to reveal which texts readers read and which specific passages they thought important enough to copy. Most of these notebooks have survived only
in manuscript, but some were published, as Jillian M. Hess explains in Chapter 1, ‘British Commonplace Readers, 1706–1879’. The compilers were often apologetic for presuming to make public their work, which might appear to be a farrago of random, unoriginal jottings. Frederick Locker-Lampson tellingly titled his printed commonplace book *Patchwork* (1879), and wondered whether a ‘Commonplace-book is a book kept by a commonplace sort of person’. David Allan concluded that these apologias reflect the ‘terminal decline’ of this genre in the nineteenth century, but Hess sees here an attempt to adapt an ancient literary form to a modern culture of reading, in three specific ways. First, commonplace books were increasingly presented as creative acts that reflected the personality of the compiler. Second, by the eighteenth century, commonplace books had become something to be read at home rather than at school, designed to ‘delight’ their readers rather than merely ‘instruct’. Finally, the strict organisation of some early modern commonplace books was abandoned, leaving the reader-editors free to structure their compilations as they wished.

In Chapter 2, ‘Reading in God’s Treasure-House: The Societies for Purchasing Books in Leadhills and Wanlockhead, 1741–1820’, Margaret J. Joachim explores two reading societies established by and for Scottish miners, the earliest working-class subscription libraries in Britain and, indeed, (as far as we can tell) in the world. Borrowing records appear to be lost, but we have some carefully kept minute books of the miners’ monthly meetings, lists of book purchases, and catalogues. The miners governed these libraries and established strict rules that barred any interference by their bosses. Joachim focuses on the years 1741 to 1820, and the minute books and catalogues show that, to an impressive extent, the workers were reading the Scottish Enlightenment, which was not necessarily what their employers wanted them to read. But that independence came at a price: ledger books show that the finances of such libraries were inevitably precarious, given that they depended on dues from the miners themselves.

Where Joachim concentrates on two working-class Scottish libraries, Maxine Branagh-Miscampbell ranges more broadly in ‘The School Library and Childhood Reading in Lowland Scotland, 1750–1850’. She mines institutional records and anecdotal evidence for a wide variety of schools to show how they furnished reading materials for children. She explores public grammar schools for upper-middle-class boys, hospital schools for the sons and daughters of merchants, pauper schools for the poor, and parish and burgh schools in rural and urban areas. This approach reveals how reading habits, library provision, library usage and attitudes towards reading
differed for children of different social strata. It also illuminates important cultural changes over time: school libraries assumed an increasingly important role in the curriculum; there was greater emphasis on enjoyment and leisure reading; children’s literature and periodicals were introduced; and novels were made more available.

In the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, manuscript magazines were a common form of grassroots popular literary expression, yet scholars have almost entirely ignored them. A search of the MLA International Bibliography turns up just two hits, one of them by Lauren Weiss, and here, in Chapter 4, “Although ambitious we did not aspire to such dizzy heights”: Manuscript Magazines and Communal Reading Practices of London Literary Societies in the Long Nineteenth Century’, she shows how much these amateur periodicals can reveal. These magazines included poetry, prose, art and even music, all created by groups of common readers, which, at the time, were called ‘mutual improvement societies’. As such, they illuminate communal reading, individual reading, interactive reading, silent reading, reading aloud, intensive and extensive reading, guided reading and, of course, self-education. Reader responses were often scribbled on the back pages of these magazines. Weiss has found about ninety mutual improvement magazines based throughout the United Kingdom. They show (if any more evidence is needed) that manuscript publication did not end with Gutenberg, but continued into modern times, even in highly literate and industrialised societies.

The historiography of reading is rarely art history, but Amelia Yeates brings that perspective to bear in ‘Space and Place in Nineteenth-Century Images of Women Readers’. Artists commonly depicted women reading in diverse sites: public and home libraries, parlours, attics, window seats, gardens, beaches or railway carriages; reading alone, among strangers or with friends or family; and perusing a wide variety of materials. Of course, Victorian fiction is replete with reading scenes, where authors used physical space to illuminate the imaginative spaces of their characters (Jane Eyre, for instance). Taken together, these images reveal much about sexuality, education, class, religion and domesticity, especially when they are studied in the context of Victorian literary guidebooks that warned young women away from romantic and sensation novels.

The Victorian canon was not entirely Western. In 1845 Louisa Costello published the first successful oriental anthology, The Rose Garden of Persia, and Edward FitzGerald’s classic translation of The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám achieved phenomenal sales and renown. A pocket edition of the latter was owned by Thomas Ambrose Palmer,
an Australian farmer who served on the Western Front in 1916, and he annotated it with quotations from Tennyson’s ‘Akbar’s Dream’, something by Kipling in the style of the medieval Indian poet Kabir and a ninth-century Japanese poem by Yasuhide. Taken together, these oriental classics communicated a kind of multicultural ecumenicism to Western common readers, who were perhaps not so ethnocentric as they are sometimes portrayed. In Chapter 6, ‘Asian Classic Literature and the English General Reader, 1845–1915’, Alexander Bubb discusses the proliferation of cheap and accessible editions of Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, Chinese and Japanese works. Most were not direct translations but were, rather, rewritings by profit-maximising self-described ‘popularisers’. They were not respected by academic experts, but the publishers employed shrewd marketing, illustration and pricing strategies. Some of the works were briefly popular and are now forgotten; others failed completely. But they were all part of a grand Victorian effort to bring the best that was known and thought in the world to the masses – and here the world included the East.

Bubb shows how these popular translations were interpreted (and misinterpreted) and recast as musical and theatrical performances. For evidence of reader response he relies especially on marginalia and commonplace books, culled from wide-ranging research in British, American and Australian libraries. Their personal comments show how ordinary Victorians strove to read across cultural boundaries and achieve a universal literary perspective.

The Russians have long prided themselves on being a ‘reading nation’ (samyi chitaiushchii narod), not without some justification. In ‘Readers and Reading During Russia’s Literacy Transition, 1850–1950: How Readers Shaped a Great Literature’, Jeffrey Brooks surveys the creation and cultivation of that mass reading public, from the emancipation of the serfs to the death of Stalin. It was an era when Russians endured hideous repression, some of the bloodiest wars and civil wars in human history, famines (largely manmade) and mindless censorship. Nevertheless, under both the tsars and the communists, education, literacy and popular reading expanded continuously and at an explosive pace. And those common readers were serious readers, devouring Tolstoy and Chekhov, though they also enjoyed ‘Pinkertons’ (the Russian counterpart of dime novels). After the Revolution, belles-lettres were largely swept aside by propaganda, and a market-driven literary economy gave way to top-down planning. But Russians learned to read between the lines, for example when newspapers tried to obscure reports of Red Army defeats in the opening phase of the Great Patriotic War.
Edwardian Britain is renowned for its great popular education projects, such as Everyman’s Library and the Workers’ Educational Association. But there were very similar ventures in late tsarist Russia, as Carol Ueland and Ludmilla A. Trigos chronicle in Chapter 8, ‘E. F. Pavlenkov’s Literacy Project: Popular Serials and Reading Rooms for the Russian Masses’. An enterprising capitalist of conviction, Pavlenkov developed innovative publishing and marketing methods to sell progressive literature to newly literate Russian readers. He made them repeat customers for his various series, such as the biographical ‘Lives of Remarkable People’ (200 titles), the illustrated ‘People’s Popular Science Library’ (forty titles), the ‘Cultural History Library’ (thirteen titles) and ‘The Popular Law Library’ (eleven titles), all of which were highly lucrative. He also aimed to establish free reading rooms throughout the Russian Empire. Following his death in 1900, his will dedicated 100,000 roubles to that mission, and by 1911 his executors had opened a total of 2,018 reading rooms. Some of them outlived the Soviet regime and are still functioning in Putin’s Russia.

In the first half of the twentieth century, many rural regions of Australia and New Zealand were too sparsely populated to support schools and public libraries (let alone bookshops), so children in these remote areas had to develop other ways of accessing reading material. In ‘Formal and Informal Networks of Book Provision for Rural Children in Australia and New Zealand, 1900–60’, Bronwyn Lowe draws on memoirs, autobiographies and oral history to reconstruct reading experiences in isolated farms and sheep stations. Starting in the 1920s, state libraries and bush book clubs despatched book parcels to country families, but the supply was limited, and librarians made sure that no ‘unsuitable’ literature was included. Nevertheless, children found ways around these limits and cultivated their own independent literary tastes, corresponding and exchanging books with like-minded readers.

Books are not only read: they also furnish rooms. Eighteenth-century aristocrats and twenty-first-century twenty-somethings have this in common: they both use their personal libraries to communicate something about themselves. They want to impress visitors with their literary and intellectual breadth, and they do it by displaying shelves of books that they may or may not have read. On the other hand, there are other books that we do not display in our public rooms, because they are either utilitarian and uninteresting (cookbooks, repair manuals) or downright embarrassing (pornography, The Hunger Games): these we hide away in the kitchen, the tool shed or the bedroom. In Chapter 10, ‘Putting Your Best Books Forward: A
Jonathan Rose

Historical and Psychological Look at the Presentation of Book Collections’, Nicole Gonzalez and Nick Weir-Williams investigate and explain this sociological dynamic, starting with Samuel Pepys and carrying forward to the present day.

Having studied the Western common reader, we naturally want to know more about common readers in the rest of the world. When I raise this question with historians of non-Western nations, they often point to the special difficulties they face: specifically, low literacy rates and a lack of source material. These obstacles are real, but they do not deter Joan Judge, who deploys ingenious research strategies in her chapter, ‘In Search of the Chinese Common Reader: Vernacular Knowledge in an Age of New Media’. Republican China witnessed the emergence of what the Anglophone countries called ‘middlebrow’ literature. The Chinese called it wanbao quanshu: ‘comprehensive compendia of myriad treasures’. These were cheap, popular manuals of useful information about such mundane matters as home remedies, gardening, recognising counterfeit coins (an important skill in the chaotic Warlord Era of Republican China) and how to win friends and influence people. The target audience was neither the mostly illiterate peasantry nor the educated elites, but a middling class of urban manual, clerical, service and sex workers. These books helped the Chinese common reader to understand and adjust to a society that was modernising rapidly, unevenly and with great turmoil.

One salient aspect of that modernisation was a huge expansion of popular literacy, which provided the audience for popular books. In ‘From “Bookworms” to “Scholar-Farmers”: Tao Xingzhi and Changing Understandings of Literacy in the Chinese Rural Reconstruction Movement, 1923–1934’, Zach Smith explains that, in the 1920s, reformers who had worked to promote literacy among urban workers redirected their energies towards the far larger population of peasants. The Rural Reconstruction Movement (Xiangcun jianshe yundong) drew its pedagogical theory and teaching practice from its leader, Tao Xingzhi, who also rethought the objectives of Chinese literacy education. Initially, reformers promoted mass literacy as intrinsically good, essential for general popular enlightenment, but Tao came to the conclusion that this was a Western liberal ideal, not appropriate to an economically underdeveloped country like China, and he turned towards a more utilitarian approach. His Xiaozhuang Experimental Normal School valued literacy as a ‘tool’ that would make workers more productive contributors to the national economy. And that in turn implied a concept of Chinese citizenship very different from the Western liberal model.
In the twenty-first century, the World Wide Web has proven to be a revolutionary empowering tool for the common reader. Professional literary critics from Thomas Carlyle to Lionel Trilling were once respected and influential arbiters of taste: now they are a rare and endangered species, as newspapers either drop their book review sections or go out of business entirely. Enrolment in college-level literature courses has plummeted, but readers have not stopped reading: to a remarkable extent, this literary vacuum has been filled by DIY criticism, where readers offer their own opinions and recommendations online. In a sense, we have circled back to the ‘mutual improvement societies’ of the nineteenth century, except that these autodidact groups are now virtual communities on the web. Peter Boot offers a case study in Chapter 13, ‘The Voice of the Reader: The Landscape of Online Book Discussion in the Netherlands, 1997–2016’. He concentrates on Holland, but students of such sites in other countries may find many of his conclusions generalisable and universal. Boot sees the web as home to a highly diverse public sphere, open to reasonably free discussion, where individual sites vary greatly in focus and sophistication. Many of these sites are ephemeral, appearing and disappearing like supernovas, and that presents obstacles to scholars who are trying to write their histories. But they do have one common denominator: though their members are often educated and well read, no professional critics need apply. In literature as in politics, populism is ascendant.

However, an important caution is in order here: big corporate publishers use the web too, as Samantha Rideout and DeNel Rehberg Sedo illustrate in ‘Novel Ideas: The Promotion of North American Book Club Books and the Creation of Their Readers’. ‘Novel Ideas’ was the title of an electronic newsletter link that was carried in the January 2008 edition of the Random House ‘Reader’s Circle’. There were literally hundreds of similar newsletters that big American and Canadian publishers electronically transmitted to book club members from 2008 to 2013. They were all part of a shrewdly planned marketing strategy by huge conglomerates, and they succeeded because they effectively used social media to engage book club readers as individuals, making them feel part of an intimate literary community. For instance, one newsletter asked its mostly female audience ‘Has your book club ever had a “bring your husband to your meeting” night?’ The published responses, from women all over North America, gave club members the sense that they all belonged to a grassroots circle of real housewives with common domestic lives and common literary interests. In actuality, however, such circles were largely created and run by the boys in the PR department, who had manufactured an idealised
reader as a means of selling backlist books to niche audiences. So yes, readers are eschewing professional literary critics and setting up their own web communities, but those communities can be manipulated by marketers. The trick is to address those readers over the web in an intimate and conversational voice. But there is no real conversation, just a postmodern salesperson making a pitch. Intimacy can be faked.

Precisely because they fear corporate control, younger readers are striving to create their own anarchic sites for reading, as Jennifer Burek Pierce explains in the final chapter, ‘Making the Story Real: Readers, Fans and the Novels of John Green’. The brothers in question were Hank Green (an enterprising populariser, much like F. F. Pavlenkov, except that Green used the Internet to promote *Pride and Prejudice*) and John Green (a bestselling novelist). On 1 January 2007 they posted their first Vlogbrothers YouTube video, and it quickly blossomed into a channel where readers and authors could interact every which way. Here the boundary between reader and author virtually disappeared, given that readers posted their own videos, fan art and critical analyses. You could call it a species of fandom, but who is the fan and who is the celebrity? The distinction between reading and doing likewise broke down, for this community was deeply engaged in raising money for non-profits and granting microloans for projects in the developing world. This literary culture is radically different from what we observe in the eighteenth century: scholars of that era could focus sharply on the well defined memberships of subscription libraries, or the ‘close-knit system called the Republic of Letters’ (to quote Gérard Genette). But now all the boundaries have dissolved, and the very nature of reading is morphing. And that makes the historiography of the common readers as exciting as it is disorienting.

Notes
