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Preface

Dr Katie Halsey
University of Stirling

In the preface to this special issue of FORUM on Readers and Writers, I wish to take the opportunity to think briefly about a question that preoccupies all historians of reading, to a greater or lesser extent, and that is the problem of evidence. Reading is an evanescent activity, which mostly goes unremarked, unrecorded, and very often, unnoticed. Under such circumstances, how can we retrieve its history? From Robert Darnton in 1986, outlining his ‘first steps toward a history of reading’, to those of us still working on the history of reading in 2016, we have been wrestling with precisely the same problem. As Simon Eliot put it in 1992, ‘any reading recorded in an historically recoverable way is, almost by definition, an exceptional recording of an uncharacteristic event by an untypical person’.

Darnton’s proposed solution was simple: we should go back to the archives, and we should see what we find there. And Eliot’s was also simple: we should create a database management system, and populate it with as much data as possible, from which, in time, we would start to be able to identify patterns and trends in the history of reading. For some time now, historians of reading have been doing both of these things, and we have been finding a huge, and often bewildering and/or contradictory, variety of evidence of different kinds. Thirty years on from Darnton’s essay, and twenty years on from the creation of the *Reading Experience Database*, it seems an appropriate time to stop and take stock, and to think about what has become of the discipline of the history of reading in 2016. Have we yet come to any kind of common consensus about how to deal with the problem of evidence?

The history of reading draws on many different approaches. Although its core disciplinary methods tend to be those of literary studies and history, it also sometimes uses those of anthropology, ethnography, psychology, philosophy, sociology and others. It employs both macro-analytical and micro-analytical techniques, making use of case studies, sociological surveys, statistical analysis, even what William St Clair has called a ‘systems approach’ (6) which attempts to combine legal history, hard economic data, and recorded experiences by readers themselves, and the discipline inevitably demands engagement with the history of literacy.¹ The history of reading characteristically makes use of both ‘hard’ and ‘anecdotal’ evidence. Studies have considered a very wide variety of different kinds of evidence. The types of evidence most commonly cited are diaries or journals, reading notebooks, letters, autobiographies, biographies, lending library and borrowers’ records, and marginalia. But historians of reading have also used court records, minutes of reading group meetings, student notes,

¹ Works which brilliantly combine work on the history of literacy and on the history of reading are: David Vincent’s *Literacy and Popular Culture: England, 1750-1900* (1989); David Vincent’s *The Rise of Mass Literacy: Reading and Writing in Modern Europe* (2000); Rosalind Crone’s ‘Reappraising Victorian Literacy through Prison Records’ (2010).

manuscript literary magazines, censorship records, commonplace books and fictional representations of readers and reading. Leah Price and others have reminded us that books have uses beyond reading (*passim*), and part of that history of the 'use' of the book comes from evidence such as dropped candle wax and folded pages.² Such evidence now plays a part in the history of reading too.

Scholars have written monographs and essays on the reading of single people, both famous and obscure,³ of book groups,⁴ and of particular classes,⁵ regions and communities,⁶ and nations.⁷ They have traced the reception of single books,⁸ and books by particular authors.⁹ They have

² See also William H. Sherman, *Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England* (2008).

³ See, for example, Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton's "'Studied for Action": How Gabriel Harvey Read His Livy' (1990); William H. Sherman's *John Dee: The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance* (1995); Robert S. Miola's *Shakespeare's Reading* (2000); Gillian Dow and Katie Halsey's 'Jane Austen's Reading: The Chawton Years' (2010); Olivia Murphy's *Jane Austen the Reader* (2013); Catherine Feely's 'From Dialectics to Dancing: Reading, Writing and the Experience of Everyday Life in the Diaries of Frank P. Forster' (2010); Keith Adkins' 'The Ferrar Diaries: William Moore Ferrar and His Books' (2010); Mark Towsey's "'An Infant Son to Truth Engage": Virtue, Responsibility and Self-Improvement in the Reading of Elizabeth Rose of Kilravock, 1747-1815' (2007); Felicity Stimpson's "'I have spent my morning reading Greek": The marginalia of Sir George Otto Trevelyan' (2007); Ruth Clayton Windscheffel's *Reading Gladstone* (2008); Thomas Wright's *Oscar's Books* (2008); Alex Watson's 'Byron's Marginalia to *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*' (2009); H. J. Jackson's 'Coleridge as Reader: *Marginalia*', in Frederick Burwick's *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (2009); Dirk van Hulle and Mark Nixon's *Samuel Beckett's Library* (2013).

⁴ See, for example, Elizabeth Long's *Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (2003); Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (1984); Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo's *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture* (2013); Heather Murray's *Come, Bright Improvement!: The Literary Societies of Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (2002); Lauren Weiss's 'The Manuscript Magazines of the Wellpark Free Church Young Men's Literary Society, Glasgow: A Case Study', in Paul Raphael Rooney and Anna Gasperini's *Media and Print Culture Consumption in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Victorian Reading Experience* (2016); Adam Reed's *Literature and Agency in English Fiction Reading: A Study of the Henry Williamson Society* (2011); Katherine West Scheil's *She Hath Been Reading: Women and Shakespeare Clubs in America* (2012).

⁵ See, for example, Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2001); Mike Denning's *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-class Culture in America* (1998); Andrew Murphy's *Shakespeare for the People: Working Class Readers, 1800-1900* (2008); Robert James' *Popular Culture and Working-Class Taste in Britain, 1930-39: A Round of Cheap Diversions?* (2010); Uriel Heyd's *Reading Newspapers: Press and Public in Eighteenth-Century Britain and America* (2012); Mark Towsey's "'I can't resist sending you the book": Private Libraries, Elite Women, and Shared Reading Practices in Georgian Britain' (2013); Christopher Hilliard's 'The Twopenny Library: The Book Trade, Working-Class Readers, and "Middlebrow" Novels in Britain, 1930-42' (2014); Kate Macdonald's *The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880-1950: What Mr. Miniver Read* (2011).

⁶ See, for example, in addition to the works on clubs and societies cited in fn 7, William J. Gilmore's *Reading becomes a necessity of life: material and cultural life in rural New England, 1780-1835* (1989); James Raven's *London Booksellers and American Customers: Transatlantic Literary Community and the Charleston Library Society, 1748-1811* (2002); Jane Stafford's 'Reading in the Heart of the Bush' (2005); Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray's *Everyday Ideas: Socioliterary Experience among Antebellum New Englanders* (2006); Stephen Colclough's *Consuming Texts: Readers and Reading Communities, 1695-1870* (2007); Matthew P. Brown's *The Pilgrim and the Bee: Reading Rituals and Book Culture in Early New England* (2007); Susann Liebich's 'Connected Readers: Reading Networks and Community in Early Twentieth-Century New Zealand' (2010).

⁷ See, for example, Richard Altick's *The English Common Reader: A social history of the mass reading public* (1957); Jon Klancher's *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (1987); Martyn Lyons' *Reading culture and writing practices in nineteenth-century France* (2008); Priya Joshi's 'Culture and Consumption: Fiction, the Reading Public, and the British Novel in Colonial India' (1998); David Allan's *A Nation of Readers: The lending library in Georgian England* (2008); Archie L. Dick's *The Hidden History of South Africa's Book and Reading Cultures* (2012).

⁸ See, for example, James Secord's *Victorian Sensation: The extraordinary publication, reception, and secret authorship of Vestiges of the natural history of creation* (2000); Isabel Hofmeyr's *The Portable Bunyan: A*

considered national and transnational reading practices. They have written studies of silent reading and reading aloud.¹⁰ They have explored the reading of medieval monks, and that of the users of modern e-readers,¹¹ and have worked on every period in between. Historians of reading have reconstructed the libraries of notable individuals, and have analysed the borrowers' registers and subscription lists of circulating, subscription and public lending libraries. They have written about the reading of every genre – of literature, of newspapers, of periodicals, of foreign languages, of science, of religious works, of philosophy, and so on. They have covered the reading of soldiers, scholars, politicians, children, women, convicts, servants, immigrants and settlers and others.¹² Locations of

Transnational History of The Pilgrim's Progress (2003); Andrew O'Malley's 'Poaching on Crusoe's Island: Popular Reading and Chapbook Editions of *Robinson Crusoe*' (2011); Barbara Hochman's *Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Reading Revolution: Race, Literacy, Childhood, and Fiction, 1851–1911* (2011); W. Michael Johnstone's 'Toward a Book History of William Wordsworth's 1850 *Prelude*' (2010); Anders Ingram's 'Readers and responses to George Sandys' *A Relation of a Journey begun An: Dom: 1610* (1615): Early English Books Online (EEBO) and the History of Reading' (2010); Tom Keymer and Peter Sabor's *Pamela in the Marketplace: Literary Controversy and Print Culture in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland* (2005); Carol Houlihan Flynn and Edward Copeland's *Clarissa and her Readers: New Essays for the Clarissa Project* (1999); Tom Keymer's *Richardson's Clarissa and the Eighteenth Century Reader* (1992); Kate Narveson's 'Traces of Reading Practice in Thomas Bentley's *Monument of Matrons*' (2008); A. A. Seyed-Gorab's *The Great Umar Khayyam: A Global Reception of the Rubaiyat* (2012); Benjamin Wardhaugh's 'Consuming Mathematics: John Ward's Young Mathematician's Guide (1707) and Its Owners' (2015).

⁹ For example, Katie Halsey's *Jane Austen and her Readers, 1786-1945* (2012); Mark Towsey, "'Philosophically playing the Devil': Recovering Readers' Responses to David Hume and the Scottish Enlightenment' (2010); Claudia N. Thomas' *Alexander Pope and his Eighteenth-Century Women Readers* (1994); N. Akkerman, E. Jorink, and P. Langman, and A. Maas' *Newton and the Netherlands: How Newton's Ideas Entered the Continent* (2012).

¹⁰ See, for example, Paul Saenger's *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (1994); Elspeth Jajdelska's *Silent Reading and the Birth of the Narrator* (2007); Philip Collins' *Reading Aloud: A Victorian métier* (1972).

¹¹ See, for example, Saenger (1994); DeNel Rehberg Sedo's *Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace* (2011); Shafquat Towheed's 'Reading in the Digital Archive' (2010); Naomi S. Baron's *Words Onscreen: The Fate of Reading in an Online World* (2015).

¹² See, for example, on soldiers: Amanda Laugesen's *Boredom Is the Enemy: The Intellectual and Imaginative Worlds of Australian Soldiers in the Great War and Beyond* (2012); Edmund G. C. King's "'Books Are More to Me Than Food": British Prisoners of War as Readers, 1914–1918' (2013); Edmund G. C. King's 'E. W. Hornung's Unpublished "Diary," the YMCA, and the Reading Soldier in the First World War' (2014); Edmund G. C. King's "'A Priceless Book to Have out Here": Soldiers Reading Shakespeare in the First World War' (2014); Amanda Laugesen's 'Journeys in Reading in Wartime: Some Australian Soldiers' Reading Experiences in the First World War' (May 2014); scholars and teachers: Saenger (2004); Patrick Buckridge's 'The Fate of an "Ambitious School-Marm": Amy Cruse and the History of Reading' (2013); Vivienne Dunstan's 'Professionals, Their Private Libraries, and Wider Reading Habits in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Scotland' (2014); on politicians, Clayton Windscheffel (2008); on children: M. O. Grenby's *The Child Reader, 1700-1840* (2011); Francis Spufford's *The Child that Books Built: A Memoir of Childhood and Reading* (2002); Arianne Baggerman and R. Dekker's *Child of the Enlightenment: revolutionary Europe reflected in a boyhood diary*. (2009); Kathleen McDowell's 'Toward a History of Children as Readers, 1890–1930' (2009); Seth Lerer's 'Devotion and Defacement: Reading Children's Marginalia' (Spring 2012); on women: Kate Flint's *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (1993); Jacqueline Pearson's *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835* (1999); D. H. Green's *Women Readers in the Middle Ages* (2007); Gillian Dow's *Women Readers in Europe: Readers, Writers, Salonnières, 1750–1900* (2011); on convicts and prisoners: Megan Sweeney's *Reading is My Window: Books and the Art of Reading in Women's Prisons* (2010); Mark Towsey's 'Imprisoned Reading: French Prisoners of War at the Selkirk Subscription Library, 1811–1814', in Erica Charters, Eve Rosenhaft, and Hannah Smith's *Civilians and War in Europe 1618–1815* (2012); Keith Adkins' 'Convict Station Probation Libraries in Colonial Tasmania' (2010); T. P. Connor's 'Malignant Reading: John Squier's Newgate Prison Library, 1642–46' (2006); Archie L. Dick's "'Blood from Stones": Censorship and the Reading Practices of South African Political Prisoners, 1960–1990' (2008); Helen Rogers' 'The Way to Jerusalem: Reading, Writing and Reform in an Early Victorian Gaol' (2009); Rosalind Crone's "'The great "Reading" experiment: an examination of the role of

reading, both expected, such as reading rooms, schools, colleges and libraries, and unexpected, such as trains, ships, carriages, coffee houses, public houses and trenches, have also come under scrutiny.¹³

Historians of reading have thus amassed a vast quantity of data about readers of the past. The UK Reading Experience Database (RED), set up to ‘capture the reading tastes and habits of the famous and the ordinary, the young and the old, men and women,’ has alone accumulated more than 30,000 pieces of evidence about readers of the past.¹⁴ Its sister organisations, the Australian, New Zealand, Canadian and Dutch REDs are similarly collecting large quantities of data. And yet, or so it seems to me, we have not yet managed to put together all this evidence, all these data, in ways that are meaningful to us. As scholars, we remain, for all sorts of good reasons, reluctant to draw large conclusions, to create grand narratives from the evidence in front of us. Instead, we prefer to make smaller claims, based on limited and specific material. Valuable work has been done (and is being done) that attempts to transcend national boundaries, period boundaries and the boundaries of genre,¹⁵ and a large number of scholars have carefully considered the pros and cons of different methodologies,¹⁶ but the predominant modality in the history of reading remains the case study,

education in the nineteenth-century gaol’ (2012); on servants: Jan Fergus’ *Provincial Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* (2006); on immigrants and settlers: in addition to those cited in fn 9: Allan F. Westphall’s *Books and Religious Devotion: The Redemptive Reading of an Irishman in Nineteenth-Century New England* (2014); on others: in addition to those cited above in fns 6,7,8 & 9: Araceli Tinajero’s *El Lector: A History of the Cigar Factory Reader*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010.

¹³ See, for example, Christine Pawley’s *Reading Places: Literacy, Democracy, and the Public Library in Cold War America* (2010); Miles Ogborn and Charles W. J. Withers’ *Geographies of the Book* (2010); Bill Bell’s ‘Bound for Australia: shipboard reading in the nineteenth century’ (2001).

¹⁴ *The Reading Experience Database 1450-1945* Homepage: <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/index.php> [accessed 06/12/2016].

¹⁵ See, for example, Rolf Engelsing’s *Der Bürger als Leser. Lesergeschichte in Deutschland 1500-1800* (1974); H. J. Jackson’s *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (2001); Robert Fraser and Mary Hammond’s *Books Without Borders: The Cross-National Dimension in Print Culture* (2008); Roger Chartier’s *The Order of Books: Readers, authors, and libraries in Europe between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries* (1994); Bill Bell, Jonquil Bevan, and Philip Bennet’s *Across Boundaries: The Book in Culture and Commerce* (2000); David McKitterick’s *Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order, 1450-1830* (2003); Stefan Collini’s *Common Reading: Critics, historians, publics* (2008); James Procter and Bethan Benwell’s *Reading Across Worlds: Transnational Book Groups and the Reception of Difference* (2015).

¹⁶ See, for example, Rosalind Crone and Shafquat Towheed’s *The History of Reading, Volume 3: Methods, Strategies, Tactics* (2011), in particular the Introduction (pp.1-12); Katie Halsey’s ‘Reading the Evidence of Reading’ (2008); Daniel Allington’s ‘On the Use of Anecdotal Evidence in Reception Study and the History of Reading’ in Bonnie Gunzenhauser’s *Reading in History: New Methodologies from the Anglo-American Tradition* (2010); Rosalind Crone, Katie Halsey and Shafquat Towheed’s ‘Examining the Evidence of Reading: Three Examples from the Reading Experience Database, 1450-1945’, also in Bonnie Gunzenhauser (ed.), (2010); Kathryn L. Steele’s ‘Hester Mulso Chapone and the Problem of the Individual Reader’ (2012); Beth Palmer and Adelene Buckland’s *A Return to the Common Reader: Print Culture and the Novel, 1850-1900*; Shafquat Towheed’s ‘Locating the reader, or what do we do with the man in the hat? Methodological perspectives and evidence from the United Kingdom Reading Experience Database, 1450-1945 (UK RED)’ (2011); Kevin Sharpe’s *Reading Revolutions: the Politics of Reading in Early Modern England* (2000); James Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadmor’s *The Practice and Representation of Reading* (1996); Jonathan Boyarin’s *The Ethnography of reading* (1993); Jonathan Rose’s ‘Rereading the English Common Reader: A Preface to a History of Audiences’ (1992); Leah Price’s ‘Reading: The State of the Discipline’ (2004); William St Clair (2004); Ian Jackson’s ‘Approaches to the History of Readers and Reading in Eighteenth-Century Britain’ (2004); Katie Halsey’s ‘“Folk stylistics” and the history of reading: A discussion of method’ (2009); Brian Stock’s ‘Toward Interpretive Pluralism: Literary History and the History of Reading’ (2008); David Pearson’s *Books as History: The influence of books beyond their texts* (2008); Robert Darnton’s ‘“What Is the History of Books?” Revisited’ (2007); Adrian Johns’ *The Nature of the Book: print and knowledge in the making* (1998); Joost Kloek’s ‘Reconsidering the Reading Revolution: The Thesis of the “Reading Revolution” and a Dutch

either of an individual, or of a group. It seems, then, that collectively, our solution to the problem of evidence remains what Eliot calls ‘the pragmatic view of the Victorian naturalist’¹⁷ – we continue to accumulate evidence in the hope that in doing so, we are adding to the sum total of knowledge, and, perhaps, that eventually solutions to how we might use that knowledge productively will emerge.

And in many ways we are much closer to answering many of the key questions in the history of reading about who was reading what when and where, and we also know more about the much more difficult ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions – that is to say we have more insight into how readers have interpreted texts in the past, and more knowledge of their motivations, even if we are still fundamentally baffled by ‘the inner process by which readers made sense of words’, to quote Darnton (171). But there is still a long way to go. Historians of reading in the twenty-first century seem to me rather like those French soldiers who discovered the Rosetta Stone in 1799. We know that what we have is vital evidence that will help us to unlock the secrets of the past, but our evidence doesn’t yet quite allow us to do so. It is therefore always very welcome to see further scholarship in the field that sheds new light on reading in the past. Each further micro-analysis has the potential to act like the knowledge of Coptic and Greek that allowed Jean-François Champollion to decipher the hieroglyphs on the Rosetta Stone.

The four essays that make up this special issue are examples of case studies that individually, and collectively, add to the sum total of our knowledge of the history of reading. They take as their subjects respectively: the role played by the first chemical journal in the production and dissemination of chemical knowledge; the influence of the Geneva Bible’s annotations on its readers; the question of how artistic depictions of biblical narratives can influence the way an audience understands and remembers a biblical text, and, finally, how conventional reading practices have been challenged in the context of contemporary electronic literature. In so doing, they span a wide range of period and genre, they use evidence in interesting and compelling ways, and they contribute their mite to our understanding of the past.

Bookseller's Clientele around 1800' (1999); Anna Poletti and Patrick Spedding's 'Revealing the Reader' (May 2014); Christopher Hilliard's 'Popular Reading and Social Investigation in Britain, 1850s–1940s'.

¹⁷ Simon Eliot, ‘The Reading Experience Database; or, what are we to do about the history of reading?’, <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/redback.htm> [accessed 06/12/2016]

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Author Biography

Katie Halsey is Senior Lecturer in Eighteenth-Century Literature at the University of Stirling. Recent publications include *Jane Austen and her Readers, 1786-1945* (Anthem, 2012; paperback 2014), *The History of Reading* (Routledge, 2010; with Rosalind Crone and Shafquat Towheed) and *The History of Reading vol. 2: Evidence from the British Isles, 1750-1950* (Palgrave 2011; with W.R. Owens).