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## Reading Projects

**Professor Faye Hammill**

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"By reading only six hours a day", says Marianne Dashwood, outlining her plan of future application to her sister Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility*, "I shall gain in the course of a twelve-month a great deal of instruction which I now feel myself to want." She adds: "Our own library is too well known to me, to be resorted to for any thing beyond mere amusement. But there are many works well worth reading at the Park; and there are others of more modern production which I know I can borrow of Colonel Brandon" (301). We know, to some extent, what was in the Dashwoods' own library – volumes of Cowper, Scott and Thomson are mentioned. But what might Marianne have borrowed at Barton Park and Delaford? Which publications would Colonel Brandon have considered most appropriate for her project of self-improvement? Elinor considers Marianne's plan excessive, but what would have been a more realistic amount of time for her to spend reading each day, and where might she have done it?

Such questions, about reading habits and tastes; about the circulation and sharing of reading materials among different groups of people; and about the times and places chosen for reading, have informed some branches of literary and historical research over a long period. The study of readers and reading practices has become an established part of the discipline of "book history". The name of the main scholarly organisation in the field, SHARP: the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing, gives reading an appropriate prominence, acknowledging the growing influence of this type of research. New approaches and priorities can be seen in the most recent work. There has been a shift towards the term "print culture". In *Old Books and New Histories*, Leslie Howsam observes that "for those whose interest focuses on post-Gutenberg periods in the west, the compelling term is *print culture*, which encapsulates the material nature of the printed word as well as its cultural context. It privileges such ephemeral forms as newspapers and periodicals equally with the apparent solidity of bound volumes and accords advertisements as much attention as canonical texts" (5). That is, it gives equal attention to all the different things which people actually read in past eras, rather than concentrating only on those which we still reread today. Another term which has gained currency is "book cultures", as in the title of the bilingual open access journal *Mémoires du livre/ Studies in Book Culture*, founded in 2009. Both terms helpfully invoke Raymond Williams' use of "culture" as a keyword for mapping patterns of ordinary behaviour, ways of life, and the significance of institutions in particular periods (see Ardis and Collier 3-4). These terms also point to the increasing emphasis on "cultures" or "communities" of reading and writing – that is, on reading and writing as group activities, embedded in particular geographical and socio-historical contexts.

The essays in this special issue concentrate on the different practices of reading that are supported by specific texts or genres, and on the way knowledge was circulated via individual print publications in particular societies. These case studies are immensely valuable. They can be complemented and extended by research that begins, not with texts, but with readers themselves. In recent years, several major projects centring on the collection of evidence about readers' habits, experiences and memories have been established. Some of them focus on geographically or temporally bounded reading communities, while others range more widely and aim

to enable comparative approaches. It seems an appropriate moment to survey these projects, and consider the possible future directions of research on reading and its histories.

*Reading Experience Database:*

This is the longest established and perhaps the best known of the projects I am outlining here. It was launched in 1995 and is based at the Open University, a most appropriate venue for an open-access database that welcomes contributions from any member of the public. Currently the RED holds 30,000 records of the reading experiences of British subjects and of visitors to the British Isles, between 1450 and 1945. A reading experience is defined as "a recorded engagement with a written or printed text, beyond the mere fact of possession". From 2010 onwards, RED expanded beyond the UK, and started to work with partners in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the Netherlands, in order to develop an international network and set of databases. Records include details of the source, the reader, and the text being read, as well as tags categorising the experience as silent or aloud, solitary or in company, and so on.

*Beyond the Book*

The full title of this project, which was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), is "Beyond the Book: Mass Reading Events and Contemporary Cultures of Reading in the UK, USA and Canada." The researchers coined the term "mass reading events" to refer to "events that are meant to bring readers of one city, region or nation together by reading and sharing the same book". Examples include Richard and Judy's Book Club on British TV, the "One Book One Community" programme in North America, and the CBC's "Canada Reads". Research was carried out via interviews and focus groups, to capture the perspectives of participants in the events. The legacy of the project consists of a website with resources for readers, researchers, and event organisers, as well as two edited collections and a monograph, *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture* (2013) by Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo.

*What Middletown Read:*

This project had its genesis in 2003, with the discovery, in the leaky, vermin-infested attic of the Muncie Public Library, of a set of ledgers recording 175,000 borrowing transactions covering the period from 1891 to 1902. Muncie, Indiana was the location of Robert and Helen Lynd's famous sociological study, *Middletown* (1929), and many other researchers followed them there, so that the town became a kind of laboratory for the study of middle America. This meant that the researchers on the *What Middletown Read* project, based at Ball State University, could relate the borrowing records and patron registers to a wealth of other data about Muncie's civic, economic and cultural development. The project has resulted in a searchable database of the borrowing records (2011), and a book by Frank Felstenstein and James J. Connolly, *What Middletown Read: Print Culture in an American Small City* (2015), offering the first interpretation of the records in relation to the history of the town. Among their many discoveries are the surprising popularity of juvenile fiction amongst adult readers without children, and of travel books among readers who did not have the opportunity for actual travel.

*Reading Sheffield:*

Like *What Middletown Read*, this project constructs an individual town as a reading community, with a public library (or, in this case, a library system) at its heart. Emerging from the conversations of a group of Sheffield readers who first started to meet up in 2010, the project delves into the history of reading and library use in the city over the course of the twentieth century. The project has gathered a substantial quantity of oral history data through interviews with readers born between 1919 and 1942, as well as recording the memories of retired library staff. The interviews are available as both sound files and transcripts on the website. The researchers have worked extensively with Sheffield reading groups, including those set up by the "Readerships and Literary Cultures 1900-1950" project at Sheffield Hallam University (itself established under the auspices of the Middlebrow Network (Sheffield Hallam-Strathclyde). Both projects have blogs: the "Reading1900-1950" blogposts are written by members of the reading groups, and each one focuses on a book published in the early to mid-twentieth century. The "Reading Sheffield" posts are inspired by the oral history interviews, and offer fascinating insights into topics such as the books donated for the men who manned the barrage balloons during World War II, or the demand in 1939 for copies of *Mein Kampf* by Sheffield readers seeking to understand the conflict. The project leads, Mary Grover and Val Hewson, are preparing a book based on the research.

*Memories of Fiction: An Oral History:*

This new project, again funded by the AHRC and based at Roehampton University, aims "to find out how reading shapes our lives". It aims to establish an archive of interviews with members of reading groups, focusing on memories of childhood reading and on the ways that readers share their memories of reading. This project partners with the RED.

One thing which is striking about this sequence of projects is the growing importance of oral history, which is becoming as important as archival research in this area of study. But of course, new oral history research cannot take us back much further than the interwar years, even when interviewees can remember the reading habits of their parents. For the study of earlier periods, written or previously recorded evidence remains essential. The analysis of reading continues to rely heavily on the traces left by readers and lenders on the physical copies of their texts, whether by gift inscriptions, annotations, damage, or library stamps. Such research tends to focus overwhelmingly on books, neglecting the reading of periodicals. Indeed, the topic of periodical readers is ripe for future research.

In general terms, periodical studies is burgeoning, and I was delighted to see an essay on a scientific journal in this special issue. But information on the readers of magazines and newspapers is notoriously hard to access. Periodicals are not usually reviewed in the way that books are, nor are they so frequently annotated by readers. Periodicals are often shared, or read in libraries, but they are not so often reread and commented on. The publishers of journals and newspapers did not always preserve archival records relating to these more ephemeral print artefacts. The research projects described above focus principally on book reading, but some do offer insights into periodical reading. Felsenstein and Connolly describe the high usage of current newspapers in Muncie's reading room, as well as the widespread habit of borrowing sequential back issues or bound volumes of magazines in order to read serialised fiction. Many of the readers interviewed by the "Reading Sheffield" project recall the magazines they used to buy or borrow. Further information about readers can be gained from

the letters pages of periodicals (though it must always be borne in mind that letters were not all genuine). For a few periodicals, subscription data is available via archive collections, and this material is extremely valuable, even when it is incomplete. A nice example of a project making use of such data is "Publishing the *Philosophical Transactions*" at the University of St Andrews, which explores the circulation of scientific knowledge through a learned journal. Among the project's aims is to: "Reconstruct (as far as possible) the distribution and readership, over time, of the *Philosophical Transactions* in the global scientific community, through examination of subscription lists, booksellers' records, reciprocal journal exchange schemes, and citations."

This special issue on "Readers and Writers", then, is very timely. It intervenes into an area of research which is rapidly expanding and diversifying, and it demonstrates the benefits of bringing together new work covering a range of periods, approaches and genres of writing. It will certainly generate many questions and possibilities for future researchers.

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## Links

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<http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/index.php>

<http://www.bsu.edu/libraries/wmr/>

<http://www.beyondthebook.bham.ac.uk/>

<http://www.readingsheffield.co.uk/>

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## Author Biography

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Faye Hammill is Professor of English at the University of Strathclyde. She is author or coauthor of six monographs, most recently *Modernism's Print Cultures* (2016), with Mark Hussey; *Magazines, Travel, and Middlebrow Culture* (2015), with Michelle Smith; and *Sophistication: A Literary and Cultural History* (2010). In 2008 she founded the AHRC Middlebrow Network.