**What the Victorians read, how to find out, and why it matters**

**Reading and the Victorians**, edited by Matthew Bradley and Juliet John, Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2015, 194 pp., £60 (hardback) ISBN-10: 140944080X. ISBN-13: 978-1409440802

In aggregate, this volume of essays is that very rare thing - a welcome addition to a crowded field. As Jenny Hartley points out in a thoughtful Afterword, there have been numerous books and essays about readers and the politics and changing contexts surrounding reading practices in the nineteenth century, beginning – crucially - with the Victorians themselves (161). Wilkie Collins’s essay ‘The Unknown Public’, published in *Household Words* in 1858, wondered if the vast potential new body of readers created by industrialisation ought somehow to be taught ‘how to read’. In 1909 Arnold Bennet rolled up his sleeves and set about solving the problem in *Literary Taste and How to Form It.* Later, in *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), Q.D. Leavis concluded gloomily that it was probably a lost cause. Richard D. Altick’s seminal *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (1957) was able – from the vantage point of half a century – to take a more optimistic (or at least a more objective) view, and since then we have seen various micro- and macro-histories of the politics and problems associated with nineteenth-century readers and their reading (particularly in the West). These range from Kate Flint’s *The Woman Reader 1830-1914* (1993) to Jonathan Rose’s *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2001), and are accompanied by an increasing number of ‘survey’ volumes, of which the Palgrave three-volume *History of Reading* series edited by W.R.Owens, Shafquat Towheed, Katie Halsey and Rosalind Crone (2011) is undoubtedly the most thorough in terms of temporal and geographical range, and particularly illuminating about the nineteenth century.

Matthew Bradley and Juliet John’s volume aims to do something slightly different, and in a sense to return us to the original issue as articulated by Collins in mid-century: to explore what reading ‘meant’ to the Victorians – and what many of them thought it ought to mean. It is an excellent question – reading clearly did mean *something* new and particular to *some* Victorians (though to some it no doubt remained as far-off and foreign as the far reaches of Empire). The point is that what it meant was as multifarious and ill-defined (even in some ways eternally ‘unknown’) as it was interesting or worrying, and some of this complexity is captured by Bradley and John’s volume along with a sensible self-awareness about the limitations of the evidence available to us; indeed, their introduction defines the project as much in terms of dialogic methodological enquiry as the amassing of new scholarship. The ensuing chapters are arranged in three parts comprising ‘The Public Aspects of Private Reading’, ‘The Reading Relationship’, and ‘Reading the Victorians Today’. Some of the chapters rehearse old material – Simon Eliot’s important work on the impact of changing lighting technologies on reading practices (Ch. 1) has had a few outings now. It is, however, given fresh significance in this volume, both because of its positioning here at the forefront of the first section, and because of a neat link with the penultimate chapter. Its emphasis on the physical and material costs of reading, usually thought of as an abstract intellectual act, helps us to sympathise with the difficulties faced by readers surreptitiously devouring the sensation fiction they had borrowed from Mudie’s Select Library (Stephen Colclough, Ch.2 ), and perhaps to reflect on the impact of a thrilling tale read by the half-light of a dying candle. How did the ‘rigorous, hard-working and analytical’ mode of reading recommended by the feminist women’s reading group of Langham Place fare in the semi-darkness by comparison (Beth Palmer, Ch. 3, 49)? Eliot’s discussion of Gladstone’s failing eyesight also adds a certain poignancy to Matthew Bradley’s chapter on the famous politician’s meticulous method of note-taking (Ch. 9). One cannot help but wonder whether some books were skimmed over more quickly than others by the ageing Gladstone simply as a result of the relative size of the print and the lateness of the hour.

Other chapters put well-thumbed bodies of evidence to new uses – and (perhaps unsurprisingly given the editors’ areas of expertise) both Gladstone and Dickens feature heavily. Philip Davis examines (‘deep-reads’) Dickens’s manuscript of *David Copperfield* (Ch.4) from an unusual angle, seeing in the different layers of the author’s pre-publication revisions both an actual and an implied reader, and reconstructing them for traces of ‘cumulatively registered meaning’ (65). Catharine Delafield shows us in Ch. 5 that the process of editorial intervention in the making public of private women’s diaries indelibly and ‘by stealth’ alters their mode of address (88). Dickens makes another appearance in Ch. 6, as Sheila Cordner investigates social as opposed to literary forms of reading in *Our Mutual Friend*. This chapter in particular highlights the volume’s intrinsic and very valuable methodological enquiry into what – exactly – constitutes (and constituted for the Victorians) an act of reading; all the anxieties about education, social mobility and the potential physiological damage caused by too much reading are captured here in this fascinating analysis of Dickens’s model of an ideal reader as one who can read people and situations as sensitively and accurately as s/he reads texts. The issue of what reading is – and was – is also discussed in the final section, particularly in the chapter by Rosalind Crone on the potential value of resources such as the UK Reading Experience Database (RED) (Ch. 8). Explaining the project management’s decision to exclude certain types of evidence, including fictional or social ‘acts’ of reading such as Cordner has described, Crone goes on to offer some immensely detailed content statistics and some models for the ways in which UK RED’s data can be useful to readership historians, and to warn us of its limitations. As she explains, when UK RED was constructed, we had no idea how its data might be used, only that collecting it was better than not. And so it has proved. It is perhaps worth pointing out here that, contrary to what K.E. Attar suggests in her entertaining chapter on the value of library catalogues and their reader-annotated contents (Ch. 7), while RED might not contain very many examples of specific editions of the particular book being read, this is not because such details are ‘neither identified nor important’ to the project team (105), but because most readers do not record them. From the project’s inception, RED’s contribution form has always contained a section requesting information on the text being read, including provenance and edition. The fact that this section is more often than not left blank tells us a great deal about what Victorian readers themselves thought was important about their experiences.

The book ends with yet another appearance by Dickens, this time in a thought-provoking record of the experiences of a group of contemporary non-specialist readers working within the Get Into Reading project and encountering *Great Expectations* for the first time in 2010 (Ch. 10). Clare Ellis’s timely reminder that readers have always been of varying competencies and different social classes goes some way towards addressing the collection’s slight bias towards the white, middle class (and largely male) reading experience. This is a bias inherited from the skewed nature of the evidence available to us, of course (UK RED’s data – over 50% of which comes from middle-class readers - is proof enough of that), but it does need addressing directly. If I have one criticism of this otherwise valuable collection it is that it tacitly allows the old canon (represented here by Gladstone and Dickens) to dominate, and in so doing it excludes by default much of the exciting work recently done by Victorianists on the less easily accessible reading experiences of other reading communities. On balance, though, thanks largely to its intelligent organisation, this volume is in many ways greater than the sum of its parts.

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