

and young nation in America which is a dramatic result and expression of the threefold movement. That such active development of reading along the Atlantic seaboard critically shaped the subsequent pattern of American society we cannot doubt. But viewed from the perspective of the American scene, the instigating example of England looms up all the more clearly. We can see in sharper outline the momentous forces working towards a more democratic and humane outlook in Britain.

On both sides of the ocean the effects were immeasurable. Just as the varied, sometimes obscure, causes produced the extraordinarily rapid expansion of a reading public within the half-century between 1740 and 1790, so as always in the tight-woven social texture, effects became in turn causes in endless alternating sequence. It is not too much to claim for such numerous reading centres as we have surveyed a major role in shaping English civilization. Here in library history—it cannot be too often emphasized—we are in the full force of the current not only of intellectual but of the total social history of a people.

* * *

For the following additional references to circulating libraries I am much indebted to Mr. Graham K. Scott:

Colchester, Essex: "a circulating library" according to Fanny Burney writing on 18th September, 1782.

Hitchin, Herts.: John Morgan's library, est. c.1790.

Sheerness, Kent: Printed label of Lucock's library, with written date 1782.

Ulverston, Lancashire: John Soulbly's library est. 1797 (Michael Twyman, *John Soulbly, printer, Ulverston . . . 1766-1827*, Reading, 1966, is the source).

Two catalogues of importance have very recently come to light: Mr. P. A. Hoare has discovered the catalogue of Bell's Circulating Library at Hull [1787], 116 pp., with about 3,150 titles. It is a major addition to the thirteen catalogues of this kind known outside of London.

Mr. R. J. Roberts reports in *Library History* Vol. I, No. 3 (1968) the recent acquisition by the British Museum of the sale catalogue of the Westminster Library (1821). "Including the late London Library", the record of these 88 pages, showing 3,017 lots and about 4,000 volumes, is of prime interest as disclosing the dissolution of these two historic institutions. (See pp. 26, 27, notes, above.)

XVIII

In Defence of Fair Readers

NEXT to the phenomenal outburst of drama and lyric poetry in the Elizabethan-jacobean period, the appearance of a new fiction and new readers in the second half of the eighteenth century is perhaps the most spectacular movement in English literature. The identity of these readers and the conditions which nurtured them are accordingly important. Ever since the 1750s the rapidly-growing class of feminine readers during the second half of the eighteenth-century has been branded with the guilt of fomenting a particularly obnoxious kind of popular novel. And because of its alleged insatiable demand for frothy sensational narrative it has also been blamed for the extraordinary growth of that "evergreen tree of diabolical knowledge", the circulating library.¹ In the long history of lordly masculine reprobation of feminine weaknesses, few errancies have evoked so sustained and varied an attack as the appetite for sentimental fiction which is alleged to have reached epidemic proportions at this time. Nor has an institution often been the target of such an intemperate castigation as the circulating libraries themselves.² Such condemnation is a commonplace of literary history; and it has never been challenged or critically examined. No one could, of course, question the sudden efflorescence of cheap fiction or the amazing multiplication of circulating libraries large and small throughout the country. But where is the evidence that these libraries primarily stocked cheap fiction and catered largely if not predominantly for the poor silly females of various classes? None but hearsay, unsupported inference, and hasty assumptions motivated by various human prejudices. Most unfortunately, our knowledge of the actual use of the circulating libraries is extremely meagre.

But now comes the first solid evidence of the sex of patrons. In the basement archives of the Bath Municipal Library, the original account books of James Marshall, recording payments of every subscriber to his circulating library for the last seven years of the eighteenth century, have come to light.³ Here, on the 293 small

quarto pages, were inscribed the names of nearly 1,800 patrons, some of whom appear in successive years. As the sole surviving record (except a few precious catalogues) of the many hundreds of the circulating libraries in eighteenth-century Britain, this is an exceptional find for literary and social history.

Here are the figures for seven years:

Year	No. of Women	No. of Men	Percentage of Women
1793	183	327	35
1794	152	362	30
1795	131	348	29
1796	135	226	30
1797	148	311	32
1798	72	260	22
1799	78	193	29

From these totals we see that the feminine patrons constituted less than thirty per cent.

This striking evidence with its inevitable impact on unchallenged beliefs is still far from what we need. For we have no record of any borrowings by title, with one solitary exception: on the last Christmas Eve of the century Mr. George Pitt, staying at the White Hart, somehow inserted his actual acquisitions from Mr. Marshall's emporium, 'Fielding's Amelia Quire Best Writing Paper—& a few good Pens—Cheltenham Aperient Salts from Bond Street—'. Why these particular items slipped into the record of 293 pages we shall never know, but they are witness to the common practice of stocking a wide variety of commodities. And the lone title starkly underscores the loss of all others. Such loss stands out all the more vividly in the light of the priceless surviving record of every loan to every member of the Bristol Library Society (a private subscription institution), including fifty-one to Southey and sixty-six to Coleridge in the same decade of the century.⁴

Still the one fact looms up stubbornly from Marshall's membership; the large majority of borrowers are *male*.

If it be urged that this is only one establishment and cannot be proved to be typical, one counters: there is no reason to suppose it to be an exception. Why should Marshall's be different from the half-dozen other shops at Bath?

"But Bath is a different and special place." In what way? Would you not expect more women than men to flock to such a centre of fashion? An analysis of the marital, social and professional

274 Subscribers To this		275 Library 1799	
26	Lady Miford ^{Andover} 7 6	30 th	Mrs. Merchant 7 6
20	Mrs Combe March 2 2	1 st	Mrs. H. Hutchinson ^{20. 10. 1799} 7 6
23	M. Bead 52 New King Street 10 6	2 nd	His. Royall Highness Prince of Wales 11 11
23	Mrs. Bowen Lynton 7 6	3	Mr. Hamilton 16 Napell St 7 6
23	M. Dupington York House 5 6	4	Mrs. Price 31 Brook St 7 6
25	Sir William Geary Bart ^{York House} 7 6	4 th	Mr. Maturin 3 Garden Place 7 6
28	Marchioness Chantrearde 10 6	5 ^A	And Miss. General 31 Brook St ^{no. of 67. 1799} 7 6
28	Mrs. ^{Andover} 3 6	5	Lady Elizabeth Garnier 7 6
29	Countess Dowager Dalton 7 6		

[Courtesy Peter Pagan, Director, Bath Municipal Library.]

20. Facsimile (reduced by about one half) of pages from the Account Book of James Marshall's Circulating Library in Bath, March and April, 1799, showing the payment of subscription of £1.1.0 by the Prince of Wales. Of the eighteen entries, the eight of women (four of them titled) is unusually high and the one each from the armed forces and clergy lower than the average for the seven-year period covered. The importance of this record as the sole manuscript surviving from circulating libraries before 1800 is obvious; among the significant features of this detailed record is the evidence that barely thirty per cent of subscribers were women.

status of the patrons shows that most of them do not subscribe as couples. Besides the appreciable number of spinsters, the married women entered their names without their husbands.⁵ The classification for 1793, for instance, runs thus: Of the 183 women, 36 were spinsters, 23 bore titles, and the remaining 124 were designated as "Mrs.". Of the 325 men, 27 were titled, 25 belonged to the armed forces, and no less than 48 belonged to the clergy. The remainder of 225 are identified as "Mr.", or occasionally merely by a Christian name. These totals, significant in themselves, are the more important for the prominent names among all of these simple classifications. During the seven years, for instance, we find an abundance of high ranking members of the services like Lord Howe (with Lady Howe), bishops, including foreign dignitaries like the Archbishop of Narbonne, a half dozen members of the royal family, including the Prince of Wales as shown in the facsimile, and other personages like Governor Thomas Pownall, Dr. Charles Burney, and Mrs. Piozzi.

Thus, with a preponderance of at least 70 per cent, the men loom large in this profile. Yet, even if women did not predominate in numbers, did they not swamp the libraries with their impetuous appetite for the sentimental and sensational novel? Do not the records of publishing and the almost universal chorus of condemnation prove such a craze and the pandering to it?

The record does show a spate of sentimental novels, often sensational and sometimes erotic, accelerating in volume in the second half of this century. In this highly significant social development, the increase in female readers undoubtedly plays an appreciable role. But the imposition of the burden of responsibility upon women is an irresponsible and essentially arrogant male slander. The judgments are merely *a priori*, supported by the flimsiest random observations.

What do the records at Bath show in the only evidence we have, viz. the catalogues of the libraries themselves? Fortunately from Bath we have no less than three catalogues of this period: Thomas Gibbon's of about 1799 shows about 45 per cent fiction; Samuel Hazard's of 1796 with a total of 7,725 titles comprised the extraordinary proportion of 1,030 in Divinity and Sermons to 667—scarcely 10 per cent—in Novels and Romances; and Marshall's successor (C. H. Marshall) in 1808 had only about 8 per cent fiction of about 6,000 titles. The relative total of fiction in Gibbon's is exceptionally high. Throughout the country the average per-

centage of fiction is about one-fifth, ranging from the 5 per cent of Allen's library in Hereford to the 90 per cent of Weatherdon's in Newton Abbot.⁶

The crucial variable here is, of course, the volume of multiple copies, which might swell the gross total of fiction to unwieldy figures. About this we know nothing for certain. If, as a contemporary once asserted, the circulating libraries took 400 copies of an edition of 1,000, this might provide only one copy apiece for at least that number operating by 1790. It is significant that the chief magnate among publishers, William Lane, announced that he would, if necessary, provide up to twenty-five copies of any *publication* to a single establishment—he did not specify fiction.

Yet, in the total absence of any itemized account of loans as at Bristol, what indices can we use? In addition to the catalogues themselves—surely a fairly reliable guide—we have several invaluable advertisements: the first, that of J. Rowland, an early proprietor at Pope's Head in Exeter-Exchange in the Strand, who in 1742 boldly gambled on a most unusual amount of space in the *Daily Post* (8th September) offering for loan some twenty-eight titles besides "forty volume Plays" and "Books of Voyages and Travel of all Sorts". Twelve of the total are weighty enough, like Thurloe's *State Papers*, *Parliamentary Debates*, *Philosophical Transactions* and assorted standard histories, somewhat lightened by a half-dozen older romances like *The Arcadia*, *Clelia* and *Cassandra* and the current novels *Joseph Andrews* and *Pamela*, with excitement provided by *Lines of the Highwaysmen* and various collections of Oriental Tales. More than half are thus serious non-fiction or classics of fiction. Obviously Rowland believed that in offering these books he divined the prevailing fashions.

Even more impressive was the display of wares on the title page of *A New Catalogue of Silver's Circulating Library* in Margate (c. 1787) which exhibited thirty-six titles: of these no fiction appears except in the works of Sterne and Swift, and the only concessions to the sensational are in the *Tyburn Chronicle* and *Trials of Kephel, etc.* There are a half-dozen current works of voyages and travel, several biographies, as of Alfred the Great and Garrick and, the largest class of all, standard history. Such blandishments at one of the leading shore resorts are hard to believe, but here is the evidence. The third of such indices are the featured titles in the prospectus of the Catalogue of William Lane himself in 1798, divided between his stream of popular novels and the non-fiction. Of the former he

names forty-four of his "particular and Favourite Authors" and thirty "published this season", while in non-fiction he cites 102 titles including many multi-volume works.

What shall we make of such ineluctable evidence? Precisely what we should infer is interpreted in *Northanger Abbey* with some insight:

"But I really thought before", avers Catherine, "young men despised novels amazingly."

"It may well suggest amazement if they do", replies Henry, "for they read nearly as many as women. I myself read hundreds and hundreds. Do not imagine that you can cope with me in a knowledge of Julias and Louisas."⁷

Thus does Jane Austen a century-and-a-half ago set the record straight. In her superb reflective appraisal of reading vogues of the time she blended into the deft satire on the Gothic tale a sadly needed corrective of the persistent intemperate scorn of the women readers of fiction. As she herself, echoing Fanny Burney, once boldly announced, "Our family are great novel readers and not ashamed of being so", thus implying a questionable practice demanding defence.

It is high time that Marshall's extraordinary revealing records of membership were brought to light. And it is futile to attempt to discredit their representative character. No one would deny that in some circulating libraries women may have out-numbered men. But this dramatic discovery at Bath decisively dispels the traditional belief that women were the main support of the nefarious traffic in flashy novels. An analysis of the available surviving catalogues, now made for the first time, explodes the general assumption that the stock of the average library was predominantly fiction. The titles were, most prominently, history in the widest sense, including biography, memoirs and the like; and next in volume were voyages and travel. Other increasingly popular classes were drama, natural history—ubiquitous Buffon, of whom Lane advertised no less than five different editions—practical arts, and all kinds of aids in popular education, with widely varying selections in other classes.

The cumulative evidence from every part of England and Scotland sketches a picture of a vast influence exerted by the circulating libraries in broadening the horizons of thousands of men and women in all but the lowest classes. These much maligned centres of reading provided sustenance to Crabbe, Shenstone, Cowper,

Chatterton, Scott and Burns, the Austens, the Burneys, William Cobbett, Coleridge, Southey, Keats, Shelley, Samuel Rogers, H. C. Robinson, Leigh Hunt, David Ricardo, and we know not how many other eminent persons who eagerly sought their resources. It is time to expose the gross caricature of both the libraries and of feminine readers, which has continued unchallenged, and time to lift the curse imposed in the monstrous slander of blame for original sin.

¹ This famous phrase uttered by Sir Anthony Absolute in the brilliant Act I, scene ii, of *The Rivals*, is representative of the gaily satirical type of attitude toward the traffic in fiction.

² If such characterization seems exaggerated, the sceptic should consult some of the systematic expositions of the constant often violent attacks upon the novel in general and on the circulating libraries. See John T. Taylor, *Early Opposition to the English Novel*, New York (1943), with valuable bibliography and notes; Joseph B. Heidler, *The History, from 1700 to 1800, of English Criticism of Prose Fiction (U. of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, XLII, 1926)*; and W. F. Gallaway, "The Conservative Attitude toward Fiction, 1700-1830", *PMLA*, LV (December, 1940), pp. 1041-56.

³ I am much indebted to Mr. Peter Pagan, Director of the Library, for permission to explore the archives and to utilize freely the data from these records.

⁴ See Kaufman, *Borrowings from the Bristol Library, 1773-1784: A Unique Record of Reading Vogue*, Charlottesville, Va. (1960).

⁵ On the status of women in this century see the highly enlightening chapter "Love and the Novel: *Pamela*", in Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1964).

⁶ The data here cited are from my study *The Community Library: A Chapter in English Social History*, *Trans. Am. Philos. Soc.*, 57, Part 7, 1967. This survey examines all available catalogues.

⁷ I do not, of course, contend that Henry Morland was a completely typical young man of leisure. Jane Austen obviously echoes the prevalent fiction of superior male elevation above mere fiction, only to reveal that far more men consumed novels than supposed. Actually many men, like Johnson and Burke, suppressed or minimized their love of fiction in sheepest deference to the social dogmas. All this is more or less obliquely expressed in the brief quotation from *Northanger Abbey*.

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