The History of Reading, Volume 1
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THE CANONISATION OF DANIEL DEFOE (with P. N. Furbank)
To Sydney Shep, a pioneer in more than one field
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Foreword

Simon Eliot

People say that life is the thing, but I prefer reading.
(Logan Pearsall Smith, 1865–1946)

To pass her time ’twixt reading and Bohea,
To muse, and spill her solitary tea,
Or o’er cold coffee trifle with the spoon,
Count the slow clock, and dine exact at noon.
(Alexander Pope, 1688–1744)

Laudant illa sed ista legunt.
(They praise those works, but read these.)
(Martial, c.AD 40–104)

Little that is commonplace registers in history. Until relatively recently history has been a record of the exceptional, of change, of difference, or of contrast. To reverse the cliché, it’s always been about the elephant in the room, and never about how the room was furnished or its other, less striking occupants. Essential commonplaces such as eating, casual conversations in the street, and the street itself, fudge into a fuzzy background against which sharp change or notable differences are brought into focus. In most history the ordinary is at best out of focus or, more commonly, invisible. The quotidian is never quoted, the ordinary is frequently ignored, and ‘the same old, same old’ is worn out before it is ever recorded.

In most literate societies, reading is usually this sort of prosaic activity. Most of us do it most of the time. It is not necessarily a matter of settling down to spend a few hours with On the Origin of Species or catching up with the latest vogue novel, it is more often a matter of reading a cornflakes packet for want of anything better, or reading a ‘use by’ date on something dubious from the fridge, or a timetable, or a free newspaper, or an email, or an advertisement, or a street name, or a menu, or the instructions on a bottle of aspirin.

However, the reading that we tend to remember, and the reading that much more frequently gets recorded, is of the exceptional sort: the book, the chapter, perhaps even just the sentence, which strikes home, which affects us in some profound way, which sometimes even transforms us. One should never underestimate the power of reading to
surprise with joy, shock with facts or reason, or force us to see things from a disturbingly different point of view, and doing so commonly against our will and inclination. Samuel Johnson’s experience, while he was an undergraduate at Oxford, of taking up Law’s *Serious Call to a Holy Life* on the assumption that he might laugh at it, only to find Law ‘an overmatch for me’ is an example of such unexpected and sometimes unwelcome power. Reading, as so many other human experiences do, often relies for its impact on the law of unintended consequences.

Now, there is a natural and understandable tendency of those, particularly in literary studies, to prioritize this exceptional form of reading. After all, what is the use of studying something if it does not have a huge potential power to change and to convert? To study something that merely entertained, or diverted, or allowed escape or, worst of all, simply passed the time, is somehow demeaning. What we want are roads to Damascus: the flash, the crash, the conversion.

But if most, or even a significant minority, of reading experiences were of this transformational sort, we as readers would soon be exhausted by it, like Mr Brooke in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, endlessly buffeted from one set of opinions to the next as he read one pamphlet and then another.

There is, of course, a middle type of reading between the entirely functional and the disconcertingly transcendental. This consists of reading for entertainment (escapist or otherwise), for instruction and information – and for confirmation. The first two are self-explanatory, but the third may need some unpacking. Although we are occasionally subject, often accidentally, to a reading experience that is transformational, we do spend a lot of our reading time trying to avoid such experiences. For instance, we usually choose for our newspaper one that tends to parallel our own views, and we naturally gravitate to other texts that are disposed to assure us that our opinions are the correct ones, and to provide us with further examples to back up our own prejudices. To provide the ‘And I am right, and you are right’ reassurance is one of the necessary and comforting functions of reading. Much of the content of even the most modern forms of communication, the text and the tweet, are devoted to variations on the theme of ‘I’m OK, and you’re OK’. It was ever thus: many of the clay tablets exchanged between Assyrian monarchs and their civil servants performed a similar function.

We must not forget that the act of reading or, at least, the act of appearing to read, is also an invaluable social tool. For those wishing to promote themselves as studious, for those wanting to avoid social contact or (even worse) eye contact, for those wishing to create space
around themselves in a crowded place, reading is a godsend. How many of us, in dining alone in a restaurant, have taken a book or a newspaper not merely for entertainment, but in order to indicate that we are certainly not sad and lonely people?

Finally, there is the history of implied reading; that is, of reading we have not done but either implicitly or explicitly claimed to have done. The unread books borrowed from libraries, the un-perused books on our tables and bookshelves, all those monuments to our good intentions. Or, equally common, the books we bluff about, the allusion to a text that we hope will impress without being picked up by someone who has actually read the book to which we have casually referred. That this is both not new and all too human is attested by the quotation from Martial at the beginning of this foreword.

The history of reading is as much about the reader as it is about what is read. It is about the cocktail of motives and circumstances that leads us to select one text rather than another, and about the texture of our personalities and the nature of our predicament that determine how we react to that text. In our various attempts to recreate the humanity of the world we have lost, the study of the reading experiences of those in earlier centuries is an important and worthwhile endeavour. The essays that follow are part of a heroic project to explore one of the most significant of the intellectual experiences that we share with the past.
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Notes on Contributors

**Richard Bell** is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Maryland, College Park, USA. He is the author of *We Shall Be No More: Suicide and Power in the Early United States* (2011) as well as several articles examining the cultural politics of suicide in early America.

**Ian Desai** is a Postdoctoral Associate and Lecturer in South Asian Studies and History at Yale University, USA. His doctoral dissertation at Oxford was entitled ‘Producing the Mahatma: Communication, Community and Political Theatre behind the Gandhi Phenomenon, 1893–1942’. His current work examines how Gandhi and his colleagues collected and utilized books.

**Archie L. Dick** is a full Professor in the Department of Information Science at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. His monograph, *The Philosophy, Politics, and Economics of Information* was published in 2002. His book on South Africa’s hidden book and reading cultures will appear in 2011.

**Ilona Dobosiewicz** is Professor of English Literature at Opole University, Poland. She is the author of *Female Relationships in Jane Austen’s Novels* (1997) and *Ambivalent Feminism: Marriage and Women’s Social Roles in George Eliot’s Works* (2003). She co-edits the series *Readings in English and American Literature and Culture*, published by Opole University.

**Lawrence (Lou) Duggan** is a librarian and researcher at Saint Mary’s University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. His historical research centres on the study of print culture as experienced by Victorian era scientists. He is currently investigating the private library, publications and archival papers of Alexander Graham Bell.

**Simon Eliot** is Professor of the History of the Book at the Institute of English Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London. He has published on quantitative book history, publishing history, the history of lighting, and library history. He is general editor of the new multi-volume *History of Oxford University Press*.

**John Ford** is maître de conférences in English and Head of Department of Languages and Literature at Champollion University in Albi, France.
He has authored several publications on the Middle English and Anglo-Norman verse romances, including *Anglo-Norman Amys e Amiلىoun* (2004), an edition of the text in MS Karlsruhe 345.

**Barbara Hochman** is Associate Professor of Literature at Ben Gurion University in Israel. She has written widely on nineteenth- and twentieth-century American fiction and reading habits. Her book, *‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ and the Reading Revolution: Race, Literacy, Childhood, and Fiction 1852–1911* was published in 2011.

**Isabelle Lehuu** is Professor of History at the Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada. She is the author of *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America* (2000), and editor of *Blanches et Noires: Histoire(s) des Américaines au XIXe siècle* (2010).

**Susann Liebich** is a doctoral candidate in history at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. She is currently working on a trans-local study of middle-class reading culture in New Zealand and the British World, c.1890–1930. Her previous research focused on bookselling in colonial Wellington and on the paperback revolution in post-1945 West Germany.

**Bertrum H. MacDonald** is Professor of Information Management, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. His research focuses on the communication of scientific information from the nineteenth century to the present. He is currently leading an interdisciplinary team investigating the use and influence of marine environmental information published as grey literature.

**Kate McDowell** is an Assistant Professor at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA, and a faculty affiliate of the Center for Children’s Books. Her articles have appeared in *Library Quarterly, Book History* and *Children and Libraries*.

**W. R. Owens** is Professor of English Literature at The Open University. He has published widely on John Bunyan and Daniel Defoe, and is Director of The Reading Experience Database, 1450–1945 (RED) project. His most recent publication is an edition of the AV text of *The Gospels* for Oxford World’s Classics (2011).

**Liliana Piasecka** is Professor of Second Language Acquisition and Methodology of Teaching English as a Foreign Language at Opole University, Poland. She is the author of many articles and two
books: *Ways with Words: Strategies of Lexical Acquisition* (2001), and *Psycholinguistic and Socio-cultural Perspectives on Native and Foreign Language Reading* (2008).

**Shafquat Towheed** is Lecturer in English at The Open University and Co-Investigator on The Reading Experience Database, 1450–1945 (RED) project. He is co-editor (with Rosalind Crone and Katie Halsey) of *The History of Reading: A Reader* (2010), and co-editor (with Rosalind Crone) of *The History of Reading, Vol. 3: Methods, Strategies, Tactics* (2011).

**Jeffrey T. Zalar** is a historian of modern Germany and Central Europe. His publications address nationalism, confessional conflict and intellectual culture. He teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, USA.
Introduction

Shafquat Towheed and W. R. Owens

Perhaps it is best to open the first of three volumes on the history of reading with an imaginary example, albeit a cautionary one. Let us consider the case of a particular reader, already past middle age and perhaps approaching retirement, with an ordinary education and standard level of literacy, i.e. proficient enough to read a 500-page novel without too much difficulty. Let us call this reader X. Reader X regularly consumes fiction, some religious reading and the daily newspaper, as well as the odd magazine. Reading takes place largely in leisure time (evenings at home or while commuting) and away from the world of work; reader X’s practice is elastic, and expands or contracts based on the amount of leisure time available. Reader X reads carefully but quickly, but usually does not scribble any marginalia or comments in owned books, nor does reader X keep a reading diary or commonplace book. Reader X is happy and willing to discuss recent reading with friends and family members, but lacks the articulacy or confidence to express this in a written or reflexive practice. Apart from the turned corners of pages, the creases in the spines of paperbacks, and the marks of ownership (a simple name and date in the inside cover, or the occasional bit of underlining), there is almost no recoverable textual evidence of reader X’s engagement with owned books.

Of course, as a proportion of reader X’s reading material consists of newspapers which are bought, assiduously read and immediately recycled, or of library books which are borrowed and returned, information about reading habits might be reconstructed through circulation and purchasing records, although reader X’s actual responses to reading are unavailable to us. Recently, reader X has learned to use the Internet, and has started to read additional, mainly foreign, newspapers online. Again, there is information here that might be usefully gathered and
gleaned through web statistics programmes, or by examining reader X’s computer, even though we have no way of gauging reader X’s agreement, disagreement or indifference to material read on the Internet. Reader X is a proficient and heterogeneous reader, gathering reading matter from a range of sources, and reading across a variety of genres and formats, while leaving very little in the form of a material or recoverable trace of reading practices. As historians of reading, what do we do with reader X? How do we reconstruct such fugitive reading practices, and narrate such a reader’s real enough engagement with textual matter? How do we account for this kind of reader in social and cultural histories about reading nations, communities or groups? How do we record this epitome of the common reader for posterity?

The probable answer lies in identifying and collectively recovering as much data of reading engagement and experiences as possible, using a wide range of approaches: library circulation records, marks of ownership, web statistics, perhaps even a direct interview of remembered and current reading through oral history. Much of reader X’s actual reading and response may be occluded from us, but there is still recoverable data about some forms of engagement with textual matter that we can identify, quantify and interpret. This methodological process can of course be extrapolated across communities of readers. A single reader can tell us little beyond their own possibly idiosyncratic habits, but the collective record of thousands of readers in a given historical period or geographical location can tells us a great deal about broader trends in reading practices. The putative reader described above is a hypothetical one, but we must remember that the world is peopled with billions of readers, in many cases just like reader X, and that the history of reading is faced with the problem of identification, recovery, data gathering, classification and interpretation. If the challenge of finding enough recoverable evidence is considerable in research in contemporary reading, it is doubly so in earlier and more remote historical periods. Historians of reading are limited by what has survived (often accidentally) through the centuries: evidence-based studies are invariably histories of reading based on extant evidence.

Theorists of reading such as Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Judith Fetterley, Mikhail Bakhtin, Hans Robert Jauss, Michel de Certeau and Rolf Engelsing have proposed a range of models for readers that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. There can be intensive or extensive readers, implied or intended readers, continuous or discontinuous readers, dialogic readers and intertextual readers, sympathetically absorbed or critically resistant readers. Readers may read against the grain of
intended meaning, or as Michel de Certeau has observed, they might selectively pick what they want from a text, when they want it. In the history of reading, theory has until recently been in the vanguard, and theoretical models have by and large preceded evidence-based practice. These theoretical models, though compelling, are not substantively supported by a body of evidence of actual reading practice. Was there in fact a shift from intensive to extensive reading? Did the move from the scroll to the codex promote discontinuous over continuous reading, or did the change in format have no bearing on how people read? Was there a *Leserevolution*, a reading revolution, in the Romantic period in Europe? If there is to be any way of testing, validating or modifying the numerous hypotheses proposed by theorists, or of supporting or contesting these theoretical models, it must involve the production and analysis of a large body of material evidence of how readers through history actually read. This is the considerable intellectual challenge that so many historians of reading are currently addressing in their work.

The twelve chapters in this volume (like the contributions in the other two volumes of *The History of Reading*) directly address the central question of finding the evidence of readers’ responses, but they collectively do so from a chronological sweep that covers five centuries, and a geographical compass that takes in eight nations on five continents. The researchers in this volume use both macroanalytical (library surveys and publishing figures) and microanalytical (diaries and correspondence of individual readers) perspectives in their enquiry, and gather and interpret both qualitative (e.g. oral history and entries in reading diaries) and quantitative (e.g. library circulation figures) data. While the research methodology may often be similar in studies of different countries and historical periods (e.g. library circulation records in South Carolina and Polish Silesia respectively, or institutional records in India and South Africa), the socioeconomic and political contexts for these studies are widely divergent and geographically specific. The multiple local and international perspectives that these chapters bring to bear in their evidence-based investigations reminds us again of the complex negotiations of meaning that readers bring to texts, meanings that are often socially, culturally or historically located.

In the world of manuscript production before the printing press, and in the centuries before mass literacy, the relationship between reading and listening, between the oral and the aural, and between text and the spoken word was much more evident than it is today. Some of the most important scholarship in the history of reading in the last few decades has brought to the fore this particularly complex relationship between
orality and text in the era before the widespread availability of print. Paul Saenger has demonstrated the close relationship between the rise of monastic silent reading and the development of spaces between words in medieval scribal manuscript production, while Armando Petrucci has argued that the shift from a largely monastic to an increasingly secular (and often solitary) engagement with books gave rise to new intensive humanist reading practices.

This and the other two volumes of *The History of Reading* are explicitly concerned with the relationship between readers and texts in the post-Gutenberg, print dominated world, a transformative epoch famously described by Lucien Febvre and Henri Martin in their landmark 1958 work, *L’Apparition du livre* (‘The Coming of the Book’), and developed further by Elizabeth Eisenstein in *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979). The selection of chapters in all three volumes is shaped in no small part due to the radical transformation of readers’ engagement with texts caused by the rise of this technology.

Despite the print revolution sweeping late fifteenth-century Europe, some particular pre-print patterns in the reading and consumption of texts continued for decades if not centuries after Gutenberg’s first mastery of metal movable type. The first two chapters in Part 1 (‘Readers in the Medieval and Early Modern World’) examine the evidence for reading in two British-based studies, and demonstrate that pre-print oral and aural practices continued to shape readers’ engagement with texts before and after the rise of the printing press. John Ford’s ‘Speaking of Reading and Reading the Evidence: Allusions to Literacy in the Oral Tradition of the Middle English Verse Romances’ (Chapter 1) is concerned with the evidence of a transition from orality to literacy as manifested in extant verse romances of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These romances retain many of the structural devices of oral-formulaic composition, including, for example, the heavy use of stock phrases and repetitive epithets which served an important mnemonic function in the memorization of these tales for oral recitation. Ford argues that the manuscript versions of tales which were originally designed to be heard also include many references to reading and writing, and that these references are themselves couched in the formulaic structures and techniques more characteristic of the oral tradition. The evidence he brings forward indicates that in this transitional period ‘literacy is informed by orality’, and that an essentially oral form of composition and narrative remained popular even with literacy on the rise. In the presentation of the manuscripts, however, it is clear that solitary reading was becoming a more widespread practice. Whereas in the earlier manuscripts the text