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Reading Associations in England and Scotland, c.1760 - 1830

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Trinity Term 2016

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Short Thesis Abstract

This thesis examines provincial literary culture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, through the printed and manuscript records of reading associations, the diaries of their members, and a range of other print materials. These book clubs and subscription libraries have often been considered to be polite and sociable institutions, part of the cultural repertoire of a new urban, consumer society. However, this thesis reconsiders reading associations' values and effects through a study of the reading materials they provided, and the reading habits they encouraged; the intellectual and social values which they embodied; and their role in the performance of gender, local and national identities. It questions what politeness meant to associational members, arguing for the importance of morality and order in associational conceptions of propriety, and downplaying their pursuit of structured sociability. This thesis examines how provincial individuals conceived of their relationship to the reading public, arguing that associations provided a tangible link to this abstract national community, whilst also having implications for the 'public' life of localities and families. The thesis also considers how these institutions interacted with enlightenment thought, suggesting that both the associations' reading matter and their philosophies of corporate improvement enabled 'ordinary' men and women to participate in the Enlightenment. It assesses English and Scottish associations, which are usually subjected to separate treatment, arguing that they constituted a shared mechanism of British literary culture in this period. More than simply a 'polite' performance, reading, through associations, was fundamentally linked to status, to citizenship, and to cultural participation.

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Long Thesis Abstract

This thesis examines provincial literary culture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Substantial numbers of people joined reading associations, making them a significant venue in which literary culture, enlightenment ideas and sociability were experienced. In this thesis, associations are examined through their own internal records, their printed self-presentation and discourse, external traces in broader print culture, and the diaries and accounts of individuals who were involved with them. This range of sources and perspectives seeks to establish the principles and effects of reading associations, balancing their rhetoric and prescriptions with an account of their practices and members' experiences. It also offers the most broadly-based examination of the reading association phenomenon, moving beyond an institutional history to a socio-cultural examination of the meaning and effects of these reading communities.

Methodologically, this thesis is a collective form of reading history, illuminating the meaning of reading as constructed within associations. I follow Stanley Fish's idea of the 'interpretive community' and Jonathan Rose's deployment of Erving Goffman's concept of 'the frame', in supposing reading to be conditioned by the physical and discursive context in which it occurs. As an action, reading was both constituted and given meaning by its cultural construction: these discourses are shown by the stated purposes of reading associations, and in other representations and structures that they employed. This is a cultural history of literary culture from below, focusing on the locations of textual consumption rather than the environments of production. In addition, the voluntary communities of reading associations are an ideal subject, by which the historian can analyse ideas of community belonging and construction, and individual and collective identity creation.

This thesis develops the historiography of Peter Clark's 'Associational World', by providing a case study of reading associations as a paradigmatic form of improving society.

In addition, it furthers the library-history research of David Allan and Mark Towsey, by elaborating on the reading practices which emanated from associational structures, and analysing the way that reading associations were represented by themselves and others. This thesis also connects these specialised fields of inquiry with a broader perspective on reading associations as a cultural phenomenon. These book clubs and subscription libraries are often described by historians as polite and sociable institutions, part of the cultural repertoire of a new urban, consumer society. However, this thesis reconsiders their meaning through a study of the reading habits and principles that they encouraged; the intellectual and social values which they embodied; and their role in the performance of gender, local and national identities.

The first three chapters explore the practices and meaning of reading in this period. Chapter one - 'The Reading Material of Reading Associations' analyses the popular canon as displayed in reading associations, showing the eclecticism and scholarliness of contemporary literary culture. In contrast to historiographical approaches which separate reading associations by their structures, this chapter demonstrates the similarities between book clubs and subscription libraries, arguing that they should be treated as one phenomenon. Chapter two - 'The Reading Practices of Reading Associations' considers how reading associations influenced reading practice, and thus embeds individuals' reading experiences in the avowed principles of their reading communities. Through a study of associational rules, it emphasises that reading associations encouraged orderly reading practices, and conceived of their committees as regulators of the morality of reading. Case studies of individual readers show that these prescriptions were not always successful, but nonetheless formed a reference point for individual readers. Chapter three - 'Representations and Values' uses broader print culture to show the contemporary visibility of reading associations, which instantiated the reading public. It explores the associations' characterisations of the reasons for reading, and their construction of the virtuous, gentle(wo-)manly reader regardless of the exact social rank of their participants. Indeed, it argues that the reading associations' pursuit of general knowledge united middling-sort professionals across occupational ranks, in contrast to other specialised learned societies. It questions the historiographical labelling of reading associations as polite institutions, arguing

that the aims of their sociability did not fit with politeness' focus on form and manners, or a separation of leisured reading from useful reading.

The middle section of this thesis considers how associational communities, and by extension the reading public, were formed and defined. Chapter four - 'Community and Conflict' examines how reading associations conceptualised their communities, arguing that they displayed prevalent middling-sort ideals of a social contract and the egalitarian rule of law. It also examines the place of politics in reading associations, demonstrating that associations did not programatically avoid controversial texts. The reading public of these associations was a self-conscious entity, which regulated access and sought a collective identity as citizen-readers. This contrasts with historiographical approaches which have examined associations as social institutions which were instrumental in the formation of class identities; rather, this research suggests they were a tool of integration amongst literate people, transcending their external identities in favour of a shared status as cultured individuals. Chapter five - 'Gender and Family in Associations' shows that this republic of readers was not a homosocial, 'public' sphere, but rather was accessible to women and families, and indeed afforded them many opportunities and privileges which they did not have in broader society. The interrelationship of domestic and associational sociability was especially marked in reading associations, at least in part because the various discourses about reading made it particularly accessible to women. In addition, the involvement of families and women in these local institutions indicates the vibrant 'parochial sphere' of culture, which afforded opportunities and agency to those who were disenfranchised at the higher and more abstract levels of culture.

The concluding chapters of this thesis examine reading associations in wider contexts, relating them to constructions of local and national identity. Chapter six - 'Associations in Local Context' considers the importance of the local environment to the self-conception and activities of reading associations. Whilst they were often based in towns and built their identity upon them, they also drew a significant proportion of country members into this urban forum. Reciprocally, associations also helped to construct the towns' identity: members' reading and knowledge were expected to translate into other forms of local improvement, of the physical town, manners, and posterity, and associations were an important forum for civic commemoration. Chapter seven - 'Associations and the Making of

National Culture' focuses on reading associations as a ubiquitous, nationwide phenomenon, assessing their significance in creating a consciously national reading public. It argues that, while associations did not encourage Andersonian rituals of simultaneous reading, they advocated books' ability to transcend time and space, encouraging the mutual self-awareness of readers within the community, and their identification with other, more distant readers. This thesis suggests that reading practices and associational activity united middling-sort readers across the island, and attests to the pervasive experience of British Enlightenment offered by reading communities. It also suggests provincial readers were often connected, or in competition with, regional institutions, rather than operating in the shadow of metropolitan examples.

Through its analysis of the practices and values of reading associations, this thesis also addresses three broader themes: associations' relationship to politeness, to mechanisms of culture, and to the Enlightenment. Firstly, this thesis questions what politeness meant to associational members, arguing for the importance of morality and order in associational conceptions of propriety, and downplaying their pursuit of structured sociability, or polite 'forms'. The reading associations undertook a range of sociable activities, including meetings, dinners, and auctions, but the variant contexts and individuals who participated in them means that the 'politeness' of these occasions cannot be assumed. By its nature, politeness was a mode of behaviour for individuals rather than something vested in an institution: reading associations thus did not make politeness a priority in their discourse, and instead focused on ideas of improvement. Associational discourse, as well as diary entries and newspaper references, suggests that ideas of amusement and improvement were intertwined, reconciling the sociable and the serious, or polite and useful activities. In sponsoring a generalist intellectual culture rather than professional, religious or political specificity, reading associations could be argued to have promoted a polite agenda of social integration. Members also sought to level distinctions within the association, which fits with the idea that politeness was a tool which eased social interactions. However, this thesis argues that this sociability was more than just a polite performance, and instead manifested a fundamental commitment to the principles of civil society.

Secondly, this thesis examines how provincial individuals conceived of their relationship to the reading public. This study tests Habermas' model in relation to reading

associations, which he and others have closely associated with the public sphere. This thesis argues that associations' structures and values contributed to a realisation of the abstract public sphere, and facilitated individuals' awareness of their role in broader culture. Rather than being a bourgeois public sphere, associations' configuration of members as participants of the reading public built upon ideas of citizenship, property and honour, and these characteristics could transcend political and social categories. This thesis also shows that the 'public sphere' of associational life was accessible to women, and indeed suggests that family and associational life were closely intertwined.

Thirdly, the thesis considers how these institutions interacted with enlightenment thought, suggesting that both the associations' reading matter and their philosophies of corporate improvement enabled 'ordinary' men and women to participate in the Enlightenment. It assesses English and Scottish associations which are usually subjected to separate treatment, arguing that they constituted a shared mechanism of a British literary culture in this period. It argues that reading associations should not be dismissed as passive forms of cultural consumption, or contrasted with scientific societies which are seen to have been at the forefront of experimentation and discovery. Reading associations engaged their readers in an active process of corporate improvement, and regarded the application of knowledge as part of the pleasure of reading.

Overall, this thesis reconsiders the meaning of reading and associationalism in Georgian England and Scotland. Reading associations were a means by which a hitherto predominantly private activity was reorientated as a sociable, accountable form of cultural participation. More than simply a 'polite' performance, reading was fundamentally linked to status, and to citizenship. To be in a reading association enabled contribution to society, and a concomitant increase of social status, on two levels: as an enlightened improver in the local community, and as a citizen of the reading public.

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List of Abbreviations and Conventions

All quotations follow the spelling and capitalisation of the original text, unless stated otherwise.

Unpaginated associational minutes are referred to by date of entries.

ACL	Ayr Carnegie Library
Ayr (1802)	<i>Catalogue of the Present Collection of Books in the Ayr Library; to which are prefixed the Regulations of the Society, and a List of its Members</i> (Ayr, 1802).
Ayr (1817)	<i>Catalogue of the Present Collection of Books in Air Library; to which are prefixed the Regulations of the Society, Instituted in 1762</i> (Ayr, 1817).
BA	Bolton Archives
BOD	Bodleian Library, University of Oxford
BODJJ	Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, John Johnson Collection
BMC	Burns Monument Centre, Kilmarnock
Bristol (1790)	<i>A Catalogue of the Books belonging to the Bristol Library Society; to which are prefixed the Rules of the Institution, and a List of the Subscribers</i> (Bristol, 1790).
Bristol (1798)	<i>A Catalogue of the Books belonging to the Bristol Library Society; to which are prefixed the Rules of the Institution, and a List of the Subscribers</i> (Bristol, 1798).
Broome Street (1806)	Broome Street Circulating Library Manchester, in <i>The Monthly Magazine; or, British Register Vol. XXII Part II for 1806</i> (London, 1806), 668-670.
CAC	Cumbria Archive Centre, Kendal
Chichester Book Society (1806)	Chichester Book Society, in <i>The Monthly Magazine; or, British Register Vol. XXII Part II for 1806</i> (London, 1806), 672-674.
Chichester Library Society (1806)	Chichester Library Society, in <i>The Monthly Magazine; or, British Register Vol. XXII Part II for 1806</i> (London, 1806), 674-676.
Cornwall (1792)	<i>A Catalogue of the Cornwall County Library Instituted at Truro, September 25, 1792</i> (Truro, 1792).
DA	Devon Archives
Dalkeith (1798)	<i>Rules for the Regulation of the Dalkeith Subscription Library</i> (Edinburgh, 1798).
DCRO	Durham County Record Office
Doncaster (1829)	<i>A Catalogue of Books in the Doncaster Subscription Library</i> (Doncaster, 1829).
Dudley (1826)	<i>Laws and Catalogue of the Dudley Library, established December 19th 1805</i> (Dudley, 1826).
Duns (1789)	<i>A Catalogue of Books in the Subscription Library at Dunse</i> (n.p., 1789).
Durham (1817)	<i>A Catalogue of the Durham Subscription Library</i> (Durham, 1817).
Dursley (1818)	<i>Rules of the Dursley Reading Society</i> (Dursley, 1818).
Edgbaston (1816)	<i>Regulations Adopted at a General Meeting of the Members of the Edgbaston and Five Ways Book Society, March 27, 1816</i> (n.p., 1816).

Edinburgh (1823)	<i>Laws for Regulating the Edinburgh Subscription Library</i> (Edinburgh, [1823]).
Evesham (1825)	<i>A Catalogue of Books in the Evesham Subscription Library</i> [n.p., 1825].
Exeter (1808)	<i>Plan, Rules, and Catalogue of the Library for Young Persons, in Exeter</i> (Exeter, 1808).
Fort William (1819)	<i>A Catalogue of the Fort-William Subscription Library, Established, 16th July, 1819</i> (Glasgow, 1819).
GA	Gloucestershire Archives
Glasgow (1810)	<i>Regulations and Catalogue of the Glasgow Public Library, Instituted, December, 1804</i> (Glasgow, 1810).
Halifax (1786)	<i>A Catalogue of the Books in the Circulating Library at Halifax</i> (Halifax, 1786).
Haworth (1820)	<i>A Catalogue of the Books in the Haworth Subscription Library</i> (Keighley, 1820).
HHC	Hull History Centre
HL	Hornel Library, Broughton House
Hull (1822)	<i>Catalogue of the Subscription Library at Kingston upon Hull</i> (Liverpool, 1822).
Huntingdon (1793)	<i>The Laws and Regulations of the Book Club Society, Established at Huntingdon, in the Year 1742</i> (Huntingdon, 1793).
Ipswich (1806)	Ipswich Literary Society, in <i>The Monthly Magazine; or, British Register Vol. XXII Part II for 1806</i> (London, 1806), 671-672.
Kelso (1790)	<i>Catalogue of Books in Kelso Library</i> (Kelso, 1790).
Kilmarnock (1811)	<i>Catalogue of the Present Collection of Books, in the Kilmarnock Library, Instituted in the Year 1797</i> (Kilmarnock, 1811).
Kirkcudbright (1794)	<i>Catalogue of Books belonging to the Library at Kirkcudbright</i> (Kirkcudbright, 1824).
LBAS	Library of Birmingham Archives Service
Leeds (1785)	<i>A Compleat Catalogue of the Books in the Circulating-Library At Leeds; A Copy of the Laws, As they are now in Force; and a List of the Subscribers</i> (Leeds, 1785).
Lewes (1793)	<i>Articles for the Regulation of the Lewes Library Society</i> (Lewes, 1793).
Lincoln (1814)	<i>Rules and Laws of the Lincoln Library, Instituted January 1st, 1814</i> (Lincoln, [1814]).
Lincoln (1815)	<i>A Catalogue of the Books belonging to the Lincoln Library, Instituted January 1st, 1814</i> (Lincoln, 1815).
Liverpool (1760)	<i>A Catalogue of the Present Collection of Books in the Liverpool Library</i> (Liverpool, 1760).
LMA	London Metropolitan Archives
London (1785)	<i>London Library Society</i> (London, 1785).
London (1800)	<i>Rules of a Reading-Society, Established April 3, 1800</i> (London, 1800).
LPL	Lambeth Palace Library

LRO	Liverpool Record Office
<i>Ludlow</i> (1823)	<i>A Catalogue of the Books in the Ludlow Library, Instituted January 1st, 1807</i> (Ludlow, 1823).
<i>Macclesfield</i> (1779)	<i>A Catalogue of Books in the Macclesfield Circulating Library</i> (Macclesfield, 1779).
<i>Macclesfield</i> (1796)	<i>A Catalogue of the Books in the Macclesfield Subscription Library</i> (Macclesfield, 1796).
<i>Manchester</i> (1794)	<i>A Catalogue of the Present Collection of Books, in the Manchester Circulating Library</i> (Manchester, 1794).
<i>Newton</i> (1814)	<i>Catalogue of Books in the Air, Newton, and Wallacetown Library</i> (Air, 1814).
OHC	Oxfordshire History Centre
<i>Oxford</i> (1809)	<i>The Laws of the Oxford Subscription Library</i> (Oxford, 1809).
<i>Paisley</i> (1802)	<i>Regulations of the Paisley Library Society</i> (Paisley, 1802).
<i>Peterborough</i> (1783)	<i>A Catalogue of Books belonging to the Society formed at Peterborough in the Year 1730, for the Promotion of Friendship and Literature</i> (Peterborough, 1783).
<i>Poole</i> (1806)	Poole Society, in <i>The Monthly Magazine; or, British Register</i> Vol. XXII Part II for 1806 (London, 1806), 665-668.
PWDRO	Plymouth and West Devon Record Office
<i>Salisbury</i> (1820)	<i>A Catalogue of Books, Belonging to the Salisbury and Wiltshire Library and Reading Society, Established October, 1819</i> (Salisbury, 1820).
SBA	Scottish Borders Archives Heritage Hub
SCA	Sheffield City Archives
<i>Scarborough</i> (1806)	Literary Society, Scarborough, in <i>The Monthly Magazine; or, British Register</i> Vol. XXII Part II for 1806 (London, 1806), 670-671.
<i>Select York</i> (1818)	<i>Select Subscription Library, York. Rules, Proprietors' Names, and Catalogue of the Books</i> (York, 1818).
<i>Stamford</i> (1787)	<i>Rules for Regulating the Subscription Library at Stamford</i> (Stamford, 1787).
<i>Stamford</i> (1789)	<i>A List of Subscribers, and Catalogue of Books, belonging to the Subscription Library, at Stamford</i> (Stamford, 1789).
<i>Tavistock</i> (1810)	<i>Catalogue of the Books in the Tavistock Public Subscription Library</i> (Tavistock, 1810).
<i>Tavistock</i> (1839)	<i>A Catalogue of the Books in the Tavistock Public Subscription Library</i> (Tavistock, 1839).
WCRO	Warwickshire County Records Office
<i>Whitby</i> (1814)	<i>Laws and Regulations of a Subscription Library at Whitby; with a Catalogue of the Books</i> (Whitby, 1814).
WLA	Watt Library Archives
WYAS	West Yorkshire Archives Service
<i>York Book Society</i> (1797)	<i>The Laws of a Book Society Established at York</i> (York, 1797).

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Introduction

I. Reading Associations

This thesis uses reading associations as a lens through which to examine provincial print culture and sociability in the later enlightenment period. Historians often cite the print explosion of this period as a transformative element of contemporary culture.¹ Alongside the book-history narrative of production change, we must understand how the culture of literary consumption changed, and how this new audience of consumers imagined itself. Substantial numbers of people joined book clubs and subscription libraries, making these institutions, which I shall call 'reading associations', a significant venue in which literary culture and enlightenment ideas were experienced.² The action known as 'reading' was both constituted and given meaning by its cultural construction: these discourses can be accessed through the structures, practices and self-representation of reading associations. In addition, the voluntary communities of reading associations can be used to analyse ideas of belonging and community construction, and processes of individual and collective identity creation.

The thesis examines the period from about 1760 to 1830, beginning around the time of the establishment of the first subscription library, at Liverpool in 1758.³ By 1821, the *Monthly Magazine* estimated that there were at least 260 permanent libraries and 600 book

¹ J. H. Plumb, *Georgian Delights* (London, 1980), 23-25; P. Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783* (Oxford, 1989), 91; L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (London, 1992), 40-41, 281; J. Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge, 2001), 115; J. Raven, 'The Book Trades', in I. Rivers (ed.), *Books and their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England: New Essays* (London, 2001), 1-34; B. Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, & Dangerous People?: England 1783-1846* (Oxford, 2006), 15.

² W. St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge, 2004), 265 calculated that 30,000 families were involved in book clubs, permanent libraries and magazine societies; D. Allan, *A Nation of Readers: The Lending Library in Georgian England* (London, 2008), 34 suggests 50,000 individuals participated in reading associations in England alone.

³ T. Kelly, *Early Public Libraries: A History of Public Libraries in Great Britain before 1850* (London, 1966), 126.

clubs in the United Kingdom.⁴ This period witnessed an extraordinary proliferation of newspapers,⁵ periodicals,⁶ novels,⁷ and ephemeral print such as advertisements.⁸ It was a boom period for literature, with the annual number of new titles increasing from under 2,000 at the beginning of the century, to 5,500 at the end.⁹ Structures such as the growing postal service, changes in copyright law in 1774, and the development of mechanised book production in the early nineteenth century all affected the production and dissemination of literature.¹⁰ With changing production came changing patterns of consumption: a supposed 'reading revolution' from *intensive* reading of a few texts to the *extensive* reading of many.¹¹ Reading had a new social importance, acting as 'an admission ticket into the cultural magic circle'.¹² This thesis investigates one way in which readers experienced and responded to this flourishing print culture: the formation of reading associations, in this unique stage between the chained libraries of the seventeenth century and the advent of public libraries in 1850.

Thomas Kelly noted that 34 subscription libraries were founded in English towns before 1800, and fourteen in Scotland.¹³ Subscription libraries flourished in the 1780s and 1790s,¹⁴ and exponentially thereafter; Mark Towsey suggests there were 37 Scottish subscription libraries founded in the 1790s, and more than 200 established between 1800 and 1830, although Scotland had fewer book clubs.¹⁵ Subscription libraries became ubiquitous not only in English cities, but also small market towns.¹⁶ Kelly suggests that the subscription library movement in England was particularly strong in the north and the

⁴ *The Monthly Magazine; Or, British Register, Vol. LI Part I for 1821* (London, 1821), 397.

⁵ Over 260 daily and weekly newspapers were published in British towns by 1820, according to J. Raven, *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade, 1450-1850* (London, 2007), 258.

⁶ 4,000 periodicals were founded between 1790 and 1832, according to D. Stewart, *Romantic Magazines and Metropolitan Literary Culture* (Basingstoke, 2011), 2.

⁷ I. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London, 1963).

⁸ J. Raven, *Publishing Business in Eighteenth-Century England* (Woodbridge, 2014).

⁹ J. Raven, 'Production', in P. Garside and K. O'Brien (eds), *English and British Fiction, 1750-1820* (Oxford, 2015), 4.

¹⁰ S. E. Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660-1800* (Oxford, 2009); St Clair, *Nation*, 87.

¹¹ R. Engelsing, *Der Bürger als Leser: Lesergeschichte in Deutschland 1500-1800* (Stuttgart, 1974), quoted in Allan, *Nation*, 226-227.

¹² R. Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London, 2000), 76.

¹³ Kelly, *Early*, 125-126.

¹⁴ Kelly, *Early*, 139; St Clair, *Nation*, 247.

¹⁵ M. R. M. Towsey, *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment: Books and Their Readers in Provincial Scotland, 1750-1820* (Leiden, 2010), 58; Kelly, *Early*, 127, 141; K. A. Manley, *Books, Borrowers and Shareholders: Scottish Circulating and Subscription Libraries before 1825: A Survey and Listing* (Edinburgh, 2012), 2.

¹⁶ Kelly, *Early*, 204.

midlands, with links to dissenting communities; and William St Clair supports this geographical interpretation, identifying a 'diffusionary wave' in Lancashire and the north-west of England.¹⁷

The number of book clubs is harder to estimate, due to the greater likelihood of their records being lost: Kelly calculated there were around 200 by 1800, and David Allan argues for somewhere between 600 and 2000 by the early nineteenth century.¹⁸ Paul Kaufman assembled archival references to 110 book clubs in 29 English counties, and he suggests that this confirms the oft-cited *Monthly Magazine* estimate from 1821.¹⁹ Allan estimates that there were around 50,000 participants in book clubs by the early nineteenth century, facilitated by the adaptability of book clubs, which could flourish in 'England's smallest towns, villages and hamlets'.²⁰ References to over 400 separate reading associations were found in the research materials for this thesis, with some of these institutions totalling up to 400 members: several thousands of readers were thus involved in the associations considered in this thesis alone.²¹

As well as being an innovative time in print culture, the period covered by this thesis spans important cultural shifts into the Romantic period, alongside the social and ideological crisis of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, and the growing nineteenth-century reform movement. Although reading associations began in the later eighteenth century, it is important to consider how they developed into the nineteenth century. The founding of libraries had continued apace after the turn of the century, meaning 'few Scottish towns of even relatively small size were without one', and the same can be said of English market towns.²² Amanda Vickery suggests that women's book societies proliferated from the 1810s, reading this as an 'institutionalization of female intellectual life' in the early nineteenth century.²³ Specific literary trends make the early decades of the nineteenth century an important period of self-definition for associations, for example in their purported turn towards

¹⁷ St Clair, *Nation*, 247.

¹⁸ Kelly, *Early*, 137; Allan, *Nation*, 26.

¹⁹ P. Kaufman, 'English Book Clubs and Their Social Import', in P. Kaufman, *Libraries and their Users: Collected Papers in Library History* (London, 1969), 61; *The Monthly Magazine; Or, British Register*, Vol. LI Part I for 1821 (London, 1821), 397.

²⁰ Allan, *Nation*, 34-36.

²¹ e.g. Moseley-Street Library, Manchester, in *The Monthly Magazine; Or, British Register*, Vol. XXI Part I for 1806 (London, 1806), 206.

²² B. Harris and C. McKean, *The Scottish Town in the Age of the Enlightenment 1740-1820* (Edinburgh, 2014), 386; Kelly, *Early*, 204.

²³ A. Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (London, 2003), 258.

imaginative literature and 'national bestsellers'.²⁴ For this reason, this thesis considers how reading associations developed beyond the limits of their original 'polite and commercial age', tracing their role in nineteenth-century culture until the technological and social changes of the 1830s.²⁵

The thesis employs 1830 as a practical endpoint to the study, for surviving records proliferate beyond this point, and would skew the source base of this study towards the nineteenth century. The practices of reading associations themselves were not substantially changing at this point, with the trend towards cumulatively increasing membership, stock and admissions costs over time in some libraries being countered by the disbanding of other associations, and the continuance of small-scale book clubs.²⁶ Rather, dynamic changes were occurring in competitor institutions in the wider associational and literary landscape. Literary and philosophical societies and mechanics' libraries were in the ascendant, and were providing a range of educational facilities alongside reading matter.²⁷ The increasing opportunities for working-class readers were particularly marked, not only through the mechanics' institutes but through coffee houses and Sunday school libraries.²⁸ The rise of the triple-decker novel format in the 1820s was targeted at commercial circulating libraries.²⁹ The importance and preeminence of the reading association formats discussed here was thus dwindling in public literary and learned culture after the 1830s.³⁰ In the decades beyond the end-point of this study, library provision evolved dramatically, with the codification of legal deposit privileges in 1842,³¹ and the passing of the Public Libraries Act in 1850: this thesis thus focuses on the heyday of book clubs and subscription libraries from 1760 to 1830.

²⁴ St Clair, *Nation*, 254.

²⁵ J. Raven, 'The Promotion and Constraints of Knowledge: the Changing Structure of Publishing in Victorian Britain', in M. Daunt (ed.), *The Organisation of Knowledge in Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 2005), 264; R. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Chicago, 1957), 269-274; S. Colclough and D. Vincent, 'Reading', in D. McKitterick (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain: Volume 6 1830-1914* (Cambridge, 2009), 299; A. Fyfe, 'The Information Revolution', in McKitterick, *Cambridge History*, 582; D. Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge, and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography* (London, 1982), 136.

²⁶ Kelly, *Early*, 204-207.

²⁷ Altick, *The English Common Reader*, 198; Hilton, *Mad*, 172-174; J. Golinski, *Science as Public Culture: Chemistry and Enlightenment in Britain, 1760-1820* (Cambridge, 1992), 248.

²⁸ Kelly, *Early*, 186, 200; D. Wynne, 'Readers and Reading Practices', in J. Kucich and J. B. Taylor (eds), *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: Volume Three: the Nineteenth-Century Novel 1820-1880* (Oxford, 2011), 26-27.

²⁹ J. Shattock, 'The Publishing Industry', in *ibid.*, 6-7.

³⁰ Kelly, *Early*, 220.

³¹ G. Mandelbrote and K. A. Manley, 'Introduction: the Changing World of Libraries - from Cloister to Hearth', in G. Mandelbrote and K. A. Manley (eds), *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland*, Volume II (Cambridge, 2014), 4

The reading associations considered here were part of a 'vast irresistible movement' in the proliferation of print consumption, and can be situated more widely in the growth of associations in this period: Peter Clark estimates that over the eighteenth century over 130 types of association were established, with 25,000 clubs in the Anglophone world.³² From the 1780s onwards, there was a formalisation of associational practice, and a tendency towards national networks of associations focusing on forms of social discipline and reform.³³ Clark suggests that by the later eighteenth century, even small market towns had a range of leisure, learned, social and benefit societies.³⁴ Reading associations were thus one element in an associational landscape, and members may have participated in a range of other improving or entertaining societies.

One closely linked form was the literary and philosophical societies, which particularly flourished in northern industrial towns with the founding of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society in 1781, and which experienced a second wave of establishment from the 1810s.³⁵ Undertaking scientific activities, presenting papers and collecting specimens, the members of these associations sought to engage in active scholarly endeavours in a way that reading associations did not. However, they were broadly-based intellectual societies, discussing science, literature, antiquarian studies and other forms of improvement: it is not until the 1820s and 1830s that these societies began to focus on their 'scientific' over their 'literary' aims.³⁶ They originated from conversational groups of like-minded men (often dissenters),³⁷ and in the case of the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society, a sub-group called the Literary Club sought to preserve this conversational ethos rather than becoming a library institution. Literary and philosophical societies are thus distinguished by offering a discursive learning environment, whereas reading associations offered communal resources but not communal education.³⁸

³² Kaufman, 'English Book Clubs', 59; P. Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800: the Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford, 2000), 2.

³³ Clark, *Clubs*, 95.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

³⁵ I. McCalman (ed.), *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture, 1776-1832* (Oxford, 1999), 585; Hilton, *Mad*, 172.

³⁶ Clark, *Clubs*, 111; J. Mee and J. Wilkes, 'Transpennine Enlightenment: The Literary and Philosophical Societies and Knowledge Networks in the North, 1781-1830', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Dec., 2015), 607.

³⁷ P. Elliott, *The Derby Philosophers: Science and Culture in British Urban Society, 1700-1850* (Manchester, 2009), 37; J. S. Uglow, *The Lunar Men: The Friends Who Made the Future, 1730-1810* (London, 2002), xiv, 84, 124.

³⁸ Mee and Wilkes, 'Transpennine Enlightenment', 606.

In addition to the Literary and Philosophical Societies, a range of other intellectual and improving associations proliferated in this period. There were thirty debating societies in London in 1780, as well as provincial bodies in Leeds, Cambridge, Glasgow and Stirling before 1800.³⁹ There were agricultural improvement societies such as the Bath Society for the Encouragement of Agriculture, Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, founded in 1777, as well as county agricultural societies in England and Scotland, which focused on making practical improvements to technologies and practices.⁴⁰ Other fields such as medicine developed specialist professional bodies in London and Edinburgh, and by 1830 there were at least 40 provincial medical societies for discussion, knowledge exchange and acquiring professional texts.⁴¹ Such interest-groups could also benefit from reading associations, as Mark Towsey shows in his study of 'agricultural readers' in the Selkirk Subscription Library;⁴² however, this thesis examines how reading associations' commitment to general knowledge enabled a learned community to develop across professional categories.

Associations have also been perceived as part of a new world of cultural opportunities for the acquisition or demonstration of politeness or gentility, which was 'a bourgeois quality in so far as it could be acquired by any ambitious bookseller, clerk, or dancing master'.⁴³ Reading associations mainly comprised 'the professional and commercial classes', and will be referred to here as a predominantly middling-sort enterprise.⁴⁴ However, they also included aristocrats and gentry,⁴⁵ and they thus provided an institutional forum in which the 'lively social intercourse of commercial, professional and landed elites' occurred in provincial society.⁴⁶ Reading associations were a place of social mingling, for those with sufficient wealth and literacy to participate. This thesis moves beyond socio-demographic analyses of reading association communities, and instead considers how these mainly well-off, propertied readers might have defined themselves by shared values. It will examine this literary culture, considering how reading linked to the performance of status; the social

³⁹ Clark, *Clubs*, 120-121.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 112-113.

⁴¹ Ibid., 114-115; P. J. Corfield, *Power and the Professions in Britain 1700-1850* (London, 1995), 159-160.

⁴² M. R. M. Towsey, "'Store their Minds with Much Valuable Knowledge": Agricultural Improvement at the Selkirk Subscription Library, 1799-1814', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Dec., 2015), 569-584.

⁴³ Hilton, *Mad*, 125.

⁴⁴ Allan, *Nation*, 67. See also Towsey, *Reading*, 61; St Clair, *Nation*, 250; Kelly, *Early*, 127.

⁴⁵ Allan, *Nation*, 35-40, 66-70.

⁴⁶ Vickery, *Daughter*, 33.

principles that associational communities embodied; and readers' self-ascribed identity within local, national and 'public' frameworks.

The associations investigated in this thesis were established across England, ranging from small village book clubs in Cumbria to venerable subscription libraries in Exeter. David Allan argues for the 'rude health' of book clubs in various 'social and geographical conditions',⁴⁷ and this ubiquity and popularity makes them an ideal way to compare the cultural practices of middling sorts across the country. Whilst metropolitan examples are included within this thesis for comparison, reading associations often enabled statements of provincial pride and autonomy: studying these institutions illuminates literary culture beyond metropolitan production centres or presumed fashion hubs. A presidential address to the Hull Subscription Library subscribers placed this local institution alongside the libraries of Alexandria, Carthage, and Palmyra, whilst also claiming that 'some of our trading towns have done more in the last fifty years towards the encouragement of literature' than the 'two Universities' of Britain.⁴⁸ The localism of reading associations was thus in tension with the universalism of the reading public which they represented, and the broader polite culture to which they contributed. Examining reading associations gives an insight into the middling sorts' negotiations of multiple levels of identity across their different social imaginaries, which were particularly contested in this period of social fluidity, urbanisation, and imperial expansion.

An important context for this discussion of identities, I suggest, was the changed relationship between England and Scotland after the 1707 Act of Union. Despite this central structural change to the state and nation, much cultural history of the period remains firmly separated into English and Scottish historiographies. We have studies of the English urban renaissance, and the Scottish town;⁴⁹ of the English middle class and of Scottish

⁴⁷ Allan, *Nation*, 35.

⁴⁸ *An Address to the Subscribers to the Library at Hull, at the opening of the new rooms, on the first of July, 1801* (Hull, 1801).

⁴⁹ P. Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660-1770* (Oxford, 1989); Harris and McKean, *The Scottish Town*.

consumers;⁵⁰ and of English manners and Scottish Enlightenment.⁵¹ Reading associations prove no exception to this divide: Allan examines *A Nation of Readers: The Lending Library in Georgian England* while Mark Towsey is *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment: Books and their Readers in Provincial Scotland*.⁵² Instead, this thesis considers Scottish associations alongside English ones, presenting a picture of associational life which is attentive to the ways in which English and Scottish contemporaries were united as a reading public. This thesis argues that these cultural participants were aware and even proud of their British diversity, demonstrated by the rising interest in Scottish philosophy and Scottish fiction.

The reading associations of this thesis are defined as voluntary organisations of individuals who clubbed together for the primary purpose of acquiring and reading books. This term thus denotes book clubs as well as subscription libraries. Book clubs, first recorded in the 1740s, pooled their admissions and subscription money to acquire books, which were then circulated amongst members, and sold off at the end of the year.⁵³ They are often seen as an informal, convivial form of sociability, meeting on a regular basis in taverns or homes to conduct their business.⁵⁴ Another form of communal book provision was subscription libraries, mainly developing from the 1770s, which collected money from subscriptions, entrance fees and, sometimes, proprietary shares, in order to purchase books which would be loaned to members from a permanent collection. At the most expensive end of the spectrum, subscription libraries erected their own buildings, becoming visible, civic institutions. These reading associations adopted a variety of names, including book and reading societies, permanent and subscription libraries, and, somewhat confusingly, circulating libraries. These names do not clearly link to the structural differences between associations. The circulating library proper was a commercial organisation run for profit by a

⁵⁰ L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (London, 1987); P. J. Corfield, 'Class by Name and Number in Eighteenth-Century England', *History*, Vol. 72 (1987), 38-61; H. R. French, *The Middle Sort of People in Provincial England, 1600-1750* (Oxford, 2007); S. Nenadic, 'Middle Rank Consumers and Domestic Culture in Edinburgh and Glasgow 1720-1840', *Past and Present*, Vol. 145, No. 1 (Nov., 1994), 122-156.

⁵¹ L. E. Klein, 'Politeness for Plebes. Consumption and Social Identity in Early Eighteenth-Century England', in A. Bermingham and J. Brewer (eds), *The Consumption of Culture 1600-1800: Image, Object, Text* (London, 1997), 362-382; Langford, *Polite*; R. B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1985); H. Trevor-Roper, 'The Scottish Enlightenment', in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, LVIII (Geneva, 1967), 1635-1658; A. C. Chitnis, *The Scottish Enlightenment: A Social History* (London, 1976).

⁵² Allan, *Nation*; Towsey, *Reading*.

⁵³ *The Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany*, July 1, 1821, 66.

⁵⁴ I. Ferris, *Book-Men, Book Clubs, and the Romantic Literary Sphere* (Basingstoke, 2015), 113-114.

business person, and thus falls outside the scope of this thesis. Whilst their practices may have been similar to the associations considered here, in that individuals would pay a subscription fee and borrow a book, this thesis is concerned with the ethos and operation of self-regulating organisations of individuals which affiliated for mutual benefit rather than business gain.

The book club and subscription library models of associational practice were principally distinguished by whether books were sold off annually or kept as a permanent library.⁵⁵ However, Allan also acknowledges that clubs would sometimes ‘metamorphose’ into libraries, and book clubs thus ‘encompass a very wide spectrum of activities and ambitions’.⁵⁶ Whilst the distinction between permanent and temporary collections may not provide a firm way to categorise different types of reading association, there were broader implications of permanent collections, such as the need for premises, and the larger stock of reading matter that would be available to members over time. This can be contrasted to the most basic form of book club, which circulated each new book to their entire membership roster.⁵⁷ The practice of circulation was rarely used by subscription libraries, except in relation to periodicals, or to deal with a waiting-list for popular or new books.⁵⁸ Chapters one and two examine the reading matter and reading practice of both types of associations, to assess whether these structures facilitated fundamentally different forms of textual engagement, or promoted common literary values and practices.

The use of shares by subscription libraries, which thereby configured their members as proprietors of the library, is another way in which libraries have been distinguished from clubs.⁵⁹ However, some subscription libraries specified that their property ‘shall belong to the society in general, excluding individual shares’, and configured members as having

⁵⁵ Kelly, *Early*, 136, Allan, *Nation*, 29; see also 34.

⁵⁶ Allan, *Nation*, 30. For example, of the associations considered in this thesis, various subscription libraries had rules permitting the disposal of duplicate or temporary works; Chichester Library Society acquired two classes of books, temporary and permanent in *Chichester Library Society* (1806), 675-676

⁵⁷ e.g. BOD, G. A. Warw b.1 (777) *Articles established for the Government of a Book Society in the City of Coventry; London* (1800), 4; *Chichester Book Society* (1806), 673; *Dursley* (1818), 4; *Edgbaston* (1816), 2; BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 5 (78), 2.

⁵⁸ *A Letter from the Chairman Explaining the Founding of the Library. With Rules.* (Reading, 1807), 3; *York Book Society* (1797), 8, 10; LPL, MS3167, Bennett Commonplace Book 1792.

⁵⁹ Kaufman, ‘English Book Clubs’, 38.

'privileges' rather than property rights.⁶⁰ Conversely, book clubs could describe their members as shareholders, requiring new members to buy in to their 'share of the society's stock' despite it being sold off annually.⁶¹ Again, these structural differences did not always clearly define libraries from book clubs: Kaufman recognises a 'hybrid library-book-club' which had proprietary shares alongside monthly, 'convivial' meetings.⁶²

Thus, moving beyond institutional structures, distinctions between libraries and book clubs hinge on the differing social experience that they provided, and their variant aims and cultural meanings. Clubs generally met for monthly meetings, which meant that all members participated in decision-making; larger subscription libraries were managed through elected committees, with the whole community only coming together for annual meetings.⁶³ This management structure was a response to the relative size of the associations: Kelly suggests that book clubs had less than 24 members, whereas subscription libraries could have between 12 and 500.⁶⁴ The smaller size of book clubs meant they thus 'served a social as well as a literary purpose'.⁶⁵ Yet, while there is evidently a distinction between the social opportunities offered by a 500-member subscription library and a 20-person book club, we should not ignore the commonality of experience between book clubs and smaller subscription libraries.

Indeed, the social experience offered by associations varied greatly even within the subscription library or book club categories, and this thesis thus examines a spectrum of associational practices rather than clearly differentiated types. Book clubs predominantly met on a monthly basis to order books: however, the Chichester Book Society reduced this to quarterly meetings, and the Dursley Reading Society met for annual breakfasts, and only called other meetings as necessary (with at most three meetings a year throughout the 1820s).⁶⁶ Conversely, all 71 members of the Kelso Library met four times a year to discuss book proposals and conduct their business.⁶⁷ Whilst the Leeds Circulating Library's 375

⁶⁰ BMC, AA/DC/180/1 Kilmarnock Public Library Minutes 1797-1823, 6-7. See also *Paisley* (1802), 4; the Cornwall Library's property was vested in the local MPs according to R. Polwhele, *The Language, Literature, and Literary Characters, of Cornwall: with Illustrations from Devonshire* (London, 1806), 98.

⁶¹ *London* (1800), 7; CAC, WPR/59/1A Kendal Book Club Rules, 1800, 7.

⁶² Kaufman, 'English Book Clubs', 56.

⁶³ Allan, *Nation*, 41; Kaufman, 'English Book Clubs', 38.

⁶⁴ Kelly, *Early*, 136, 128.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁶⁶ *Chichester Book Society* (1806), 673; *Dursley* (1818), 5, 6; BOD, MS. Top. Gloucestershire f. 1 Dursley Reading Society Minutes 1821-34.

⁶⁷ *Kelso* (1790), 69.

members only met annually, and allowed a monthly committee to select the books from members' proposals, the Glasgow Public Library allowed the committee to vet proposals, before being voted on by all 472 members at their quarterly meetings.⁶⁸ We should also be attentive to similarities in their sociability: both book clubs and subscription libraries placed great importance on their annual meeting for the whole membership, which involved members in similar processes of elections and decision-making. Meetings were held in public venues such as the Old King's Arms (Leeds Circulating Library), the Fleece Inn (Malton Subscription Library), the White Lion (Kendal Book Club), and the Bell Inn (Dursley Reading Society), uniting members of both associations in common convivial environments.⁶⁹ Similarly, the fact that all the reading associations considered here were primarily *lending* facilities for reading in the home diminishes the importance of their individual institutional facilities in defining the reading environment.

Another area in which associations' meaning or purposes are thought to have differed is in their literary interests and holdings: Brewer argued that subscription libraries focused on non-fiction, while book clubs acquired 'controversial and topical' pamphlets, and have also been argued to have had a 'gad-fly' approach to book acquisitions.⁷⁰ By considering the acquisitions of book clubs alongside subscription libraries, this thesis demonstrates the fundamental similarity of their literary interests; and analysis of their reading practices demonstrates their shared understanding of the purposes and methods of reading. Broadly speaking, it can be said that book clubs encouraged a more regular form of sociability within a more intimate community; but using these generalisations as organisational structures for this study would obscure the variety within the associational spectrum, part of 'the diversity, the ubiquity and the sheer inventiveness' which Allan celebrates.⁷¹ Thus, rather than deriving an understanding of their respective purposes from organisational structures, this thesis considers the aims of clubs and libraries through their prose representation and other cultural artefacts, suggesting that their structural differences were simply expedient ways to achieve similar aims. An excessive focus on organisational structures as determinants of

⁶⁸ *Leeds* (1785), 95; *Glasgow* (1810), vii-viii.

⁶⁹ *Leeds* (1785) 91; HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library Laws, 1; CAC, WPR/59/1A Kendal Book Club Rules, 1800, 3; *Dursley* (1818), 5.

⁷⁰ J. Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1997), 180-182; Allan, *Nation*, 48. See also St Clair, *Nation*, 255.

⁷¹ Allan, *Nation*, 211.

associational purposes hinders our understanding of the shared discourses of propriety, community harmony and household reading which constituted public conceptions of reading in this period.

This thesis examines book clubs and subscription libraries together as part of a broader reading association movement, following Thomas Kelly in seeing the book club as ‘a humbler form of subscription library’.⁷² It remains sensitive to comparisons and contrasts between their practices: for example, chapter five highlights the greater social opportunities and management experiences that were available to women in book clubs. At heart, the institutions under consideration were united by a shared desire to associate for the purpose of reading, rather than being literary discussion groups or debating societies. This thesis examines the reasons for, and effects of, this new associative impulse.

II. What is reading?

The definitions of reading in Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* included ‘to perform the act of perusing writing’ (a competency), ‘to know by reading’ (a form of knowledge-communication), and ‘to be studious in books’ (a cultural construction of ‘studiousness’ facilitated through the practice of reading).⁷³ The study of reading, and the textual forms which give rise to it, was traditionally the province of literary scholars, focusing on what was made ‘known’ by reading. Works were interpreted for their authors’ meaning, which was conveyed through the structures, form and content of their productions. Leith Davis analysed key English and Scottish authors of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, framing their work as a ‘literary negotiation of Britain’: the thought of these authors is thus seen to represent and constitute national identity.⁷⁴ Others have analysed genres which define the period: Kathryn

⁷² Kelly, *Early*, 136.

⁷³ S. Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 Vols (London, 1755), ii. n.p.

⁷⁴ L. Davis, *Acts of Union: Scotland and the Literary Negotiation of the British Nation, 1707-1830* (Stanford, 1998), 4.

Shevelow examined the way that periodicals constructed femininity, both in addressing women as participants of the reading public, and in presenting a normative picture of domestic femininity.⁷⁵ Studies of the rise of newspapers have emphasised how this format encouraged hurried, skimming reading practices; contributed to the growth of coffeehouse sociability and the 'imagined community' of the nation; and exemplified the growth of the reading public and commercial culture.⁷⁶ The intentions of authors and the genres through which they conveyed their meaning were thus perceived as active interventions which changed contemporary culture, whether by physically constituting new reading audiences, or disseminating new ideas. Focusing on the products of authorship and the content of printed works is a 'top-down' approach, deriving its insights from the texts themselves.

However, authors and their literary structures were not independent of culture, but part of it. Studies therefore often represent literature as reflective of other cultural changes. Ian Watt portrayed the eighteenth century as the period in which the novel rose, because it was the 'logical literary vehicle' of an originality-obsessed culture.⁷⁷ David Stewart argues that romantic-period magazines were 'the product of a cultural shift' in the categorisation of knowledge into separate systems, and Richard Cronin situates nineteenth-century magazines and Scott's historical fiction in 'a cultural moment' which blurred national public and local communities.⁷⁸ This circularity diminishes the significance of the author as the originator of textual meaning, suggesting they are simply subject to wider cultural changes. Furthermore, the value accorded to the thought of key authors derives from an assumption of either their representativity or their dissemination, although these things are hard to quantify. The top-down approach to literary culture is thus weakened methodologically by a lack of clear evidence of the influence of the texts or authors under discussion, and

⁷⁵ K. Shevelow, *Women and Print Culture: The Construction of Femininity in the Early Periodical* (London, 1989).

⁷⁶ R. DeMaria, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading* (London, 1997), 145; S. Pincus, "'Coffee Politicians Does Create': Coffeehouses and Restoration Political Culture", *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (Dec., 1995), 807-834; B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised edn (London, 2006); C. Y. Ferdinand, *Benjamin Collins and the Provincial Newspaper Trade in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1997), 10, 192. However, the effects of format can be interpreted in different ways: Jackson has suggested that newspapers were to be read in their entirety, rather than skimmed, and that the local press was seen as a reliable cultural mediator between metropolis and province: I. Jackson, 'Print in Provincial England: Reading and Northampton, 1720-1800', Unpublished DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford, 2003, 243.

⁷⁷ Watt, *Rise*, 13.

⁷⁸ Stewart, *Romantic Magazines*, 5; R. Cronin, *Paper Pellets: British Literary Culture after Waterloo* (Oxford, 2010), 79.

epistemologically by the degree to which authorial or textual meaning is dependent on a dynamic cultural process.

The linguistic turn focused historians' attention on language as an inherently unstable repository of meaning, which is constituted not only by the author's writing but by the reader's interpretation. Reception and reader-response history sought to illuminate how texts were consumed and understood by their readers.⁷⁹ Within historical research, this has led to important case studies of individual readers, such as William Drake, Gabriel Harvey, Samuel Pepys or Anne Lister.⁸⁰ These studies focused on the physical and ideological frameworks in which individuals interpreted their reading, using the records of their practices and biographical contexts to recover the unique meanings which they ascribed to texts. Yet such readers are usually exceptional, in the records they left behind, their level of literacy, or their social significance. Can the nuances of reception history be applied to larger groups of the reading public, to understand their shared values relating to reading?

Jonathan Rose's examination of working-class reading practices attempted to recover the reading lives of a broad swathe of people.⁸¹ To do so, Rose deployed Erving Goffman's concept of 'the frame', meaning the context in which a reader interprets a work: this context includes their own understanding of the genre, the back-catalogue of their previous reading with which they may compare a text; and ideological frameworks such as their social, political or religious beliefs.⁸² Rose portrayed working-class reading practices by aggregating individual biographies in search of shared frames. Goffman's original deployment of frame analysis was focused on examining everyday experience, and the distinction between 'real' and 'fictive' interactions such as watching a play or participating in make-believe.⁸³ Frames are the 'basic frameworks of understanding available in society for making sense out of events',⁸⁴ and to some degree can thus be considered the vessels of 'meaning', and indeed

⁷⁹ V. B. Leitch, 'Reader-Response Criticism', in A. Bennett (ed.), *Readers & Reading* (London, 1995), 33.

⁸⁰ K. Sharpe, *Reading Revolutions: The Politics of Reading in Early Modern England* (London, 2000); L. Jardine and A. Grafton, "'Studied for Action": How Gabriel Harvey Read his Livy', *Past and Present*, Vol. 129. No. 1 (Nov., 1990), 30-78; K. Loveman, *Samuel Pepys and his Books: Reading, Newsgathering, and Sociability, 1660-1703* (Oxford, 2015); S. Colclough, "'Do you not know the quotation?": Reading Anne Lister, Anne Lister Reading', in J. Beynon and C. Gonda (eds), *Lesbian Dames: Sapphism in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Farnham, 2010), 159-172.

⁸¹ J. Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, Second edn (London, 2010).

⁸² *Ibid.*, 6-8.

⁸³ E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston, 1986).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

the building-blocks of culture. In line with Goffman's original interest in everyday experience, this thesis argues that reading associations were a context for social interactions which had deliberate implications for individual status, and community. The members wrote their own rules and made collective decisions about their principles, meaning we can read associational rhetoric as a self-generated statement of the values held by these people. The sociability of associations, and the 'frame' that they imposed upon their reading practice, can thus be used to examine the principles of the middling sorts. Reading associations were an interpretative community; they are pockets of reception history, which can be examined for the experience of individual members, as well as the broader cultural tropes that they acknowledged and reproduced.⁸⁵

Thus, in contrast to a top-down approach to literature which examines the texts for author-derived meaning, this thesis examines the context of their consumption. This 'bottom-up' approach focuses on the provincial locations in which texts were ordered, read and discussed, examining what reading meant and how it was practised by these ordinary readers. Reading is an activity, which derives its meaning from culture: literary canons, and the figure of the 'ordinary reader', are socially constructed.⁸⁶ Indeed, Ludmilla Jordanova has argued that 'all history is cultural history, since there can be no processes... which are not mediated through ideas, concepts, theories, images or languages'.⁸⁷ The common elements of a variety of historians' definitions of culture is that it is both a system (of ideas and meanings) and a practice.⁸⁸ This thesis thus analyses the values which reading associations articulated, and practices in which they engaged.

The growth of the reading habit in this period was facilitated by economic factors, but ultimately depended upon a cultural value-system which encouraged the acquisition of literacy and the pursuit of reading.⁸⁹ Representing a large number of contemporary readers,

⁸⁵ S. E. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, 1980).

⁸⁶ L. Lipking, 'Inventing the Common Reader: Samuel Johnson and the Canon', in J. Pittock and A. Wear (eds), *Interpretation and Cultural History* (Basingstoke, 1991), 167.

⁸⁷ L. Jordanova, 'The Representation of the Family in the Eighteenth Century: A Challenge for Cultural History', in Pittock and Wear, *Interpretation*, 118.

⁸⁸ W. H. Sewell Jr, 'The Concept of Culture', in V. E. Bonnell and L. Hunt (eds), *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (London, 1999), 47; P. Burke, quoted in T. Harris, 'Problematising Popular Culture', in T. Harris (ed.), *Popular Culture in England, c.1500-1850* (London, 1995), 1; D. Underdown, 'Regional Cultures? Local Variations in Popular Culture during the Early Modern Period', in Harris, *Popular Culture*, 28.

⁸⁹ e.g. T. Laqueur, 'The Cultural Origins of Popular Literacy in England, 1500-1850', *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1976), 255.

this analysis will illuminate widespread attitudes towards reading, and sociability, and will also demonstrate how these readers' values related to gender, status and national identity. This thesis examines the 'meaning' that was most commonly ascribed to reading and community, whilst acknowledging that meaning varies from person to person: it follows those cultural historians who seek an 'aggregation of countless personal responses' and an examination of 'collective interactions of numerous utterances' which can thus be said to form cultural tropes, weighed by their 'resonance'.⁹⁰ This thesis will closely map the culture in which reading associations flourished, and commonly-held values will be examined through the theory and practices of reading associations.

III. Historiography of Reading Associations

Reading associations have been approached in various ways, through library history, socio-cultural history and the history of reading. Reading associations first came to the attention of historians through the pioneering archival research of Paul Kaufman in the 1960s. He argued that their 'organizing, collective (and collecting) urge' was a consumer response to the expense of purchasing books.⁹¹ In his contemporaneous history of public libraries, Thomas Kelly situated subscription libraries between the religious, endowed libraries of the late-seventeenth century and the national libraries of the nineteenth: intermediary formations which plugged the gap between church and state institutions.⁹² Kelly suggested that the growth of education, newspapers and periodicals in this period 'tended to encourage the growth of the reading public': this demand was then met by the reading associations.⁹³ Institutional histories of reading associations thus related the rise of

⁹⁰ D. Allan, *Making British Culture: English Readers and the Scottish Enlightenment, 1740-1830* (Abingdon, 2008), 238; D. Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c.1780-1840* (Cambridge, 1995), 13; D. Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 2006), xvi.

⁹¹ Kaufman, 'English Book Clubs', 60.

⁹² Kelly, *Early*.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 119.

associations to teleological narratives of the growth of the public and the proliferation of print. However, these arguments are circular in their assumption that a growing reading public stimulated the development of reading associations, when such associations are themselves hailed as visible components of the new reading public. Furthermore, reading associations are presumed to have been aware of their own status as the 'reading public'; this thesis will examine what relationships they believed themselves to have to the public, as well as considering their relationship to other frameworks such as that of their locality.

This paradigm of the growth of the reading public was examined by William St Clair, in an important work which quantified levels of access to reading materials in the romantic period, focusing on economic structures such as price and copyright controls.⁹⁴ This production-oriented narrative concluded that reading associations offered wider reading opportunities to the same tranche of readers, rather than inducting new social groups in the reading nation. In general, John Brewer argued that the associational format, and the raising of subscriptions, was a way for middling sorts to 'escape economic clientage' by clubbing together: associations are thus seen as a solution to economic needs or production-driven desires.⁹⁵ This economic approach fails to consider whether reading associations were the most financially effective means of acquiring books, amongst a range of opportunities for commercial borrowing, second-hand purchase, acquisition of abridgements or periodical excerpts, or private manuscript circulation. Furthermore, these foregoing analyses presume that the desire to read was the natural outgrowth of production changes and other economic structures.

Yet economic factors and availability of products do not necessarily explain changes in the desirability of reading, which is a social construct and a socialised practice. David Mitch addressed the study of literacy in Victorian England through a 'cost-benefit' analysis, based on the idea that 'the ultimate actors in the acquisition of literacy were families and individuals assessing whether it was worthwhile to obtain instruction in order to become literate'.⁹⁶ Woodruff Smith similarly argued that consumption requires more than just an

⁹⁴ St Clair, *Nation*.

⁹⁵ J. Brewer, 'Commercialization and Politics', in N. McKendrick, J. Brewer and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1982), 200.

⁹⁶ D. F. Mitch, *The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England: The Influence of Private Choice and Public Policy* (Philadelphia, 1992), xx-xxi.

economic, supply-and-demand explanation: the meanings of consumption lie in its cultural contexts.⁹⁷ The question remains: why did people desire to read, and fulfil that desire through associations? What other factors motivated them to participate in reading associations? The answer must be sought through an analysis of cultural meanings, values and ideas, bound up in this new form of consumption.

David Allan outlines reading association structures and practices in a broader history of institutional book collections in England in the eighteenth century. He establishes the 'empirical facts' of 'the diversity, the ubiquity and the sheer inventiveness' of Georgian reading institutions, from archival sources.⁹⁸ In sequential chapters on book clubs and subscription libraries, Allan elucidates 'the typical book club' by aggregating a range of English provincial associational records into a generic portrait of associational life, defined by its institutional structure.⁹⁹ In contrast, this thesis is organised around key ideas of associational life, such as reading practice, community construction and spatial identities. This moves beyond descriptions of associational practices, and instead analyses the intentions, meanings and effects that reading and associationalism had on the identities of their members. Furthermore, by taking this thematic approach, the thesis reads across the associational taxonomy of book clubs and subscription libraries, which was ambiguous in contemporary nomenclature anyway, to draw out the practices and interests which united associational readers in this period. It introduces new associations which are as yet unstudied, and draws in other types of sources which enable a new understanding of issues such as political affiliations, gender, and family within reading associations. Most importantly, this thesis is not limited to English examples, but considers English alongside Scottish associations in order to assess the broader contours of the national reading culture to which they contributed.

Others have set reading associations in a wider context of eighteenth-century sociability. Paul Langford absorbed reading associations into his socio-cultural examination

⁹⁷ W. D. Smith, *Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600-1800* (London, 2002), 7-9. For a critique of economic approaches, see also J. Barry, 'Provincial Town Culture, 1640-1780: Urbane or Civic?', in Pittock and Wear, *Interpretation*, 208; I. Hampsher-Monk, 'Prices as Descriptions: Reasons as Explanations', in J. Melling and J. Barry (eds), *Culture in History: Production, Consumption and Values in Historical Perspective* (Exeter, 1992), 47-74.

⁹⁸ Allan, *Nation*, 211.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

of England, once again situating them within the paradigm of the growing reading public.¹⁰⁰ They were 'partly an indication of the demand for books, partly an example of the proliferation of clubs more generally'.¹⁰¹ He thus looked beyond the explicit literary purposes of clubs, and began to focus on the social implications of club life. Allan also argues that associations were motivated by 'the seductive Addisonian account of sociability', making them arenas like 'any other conspicuous form of cultural participation'.¹⁰² Mark Towsey likewise argues that Scottish subscription libraries pursued politeness, sociability and improvement.¹⁰³ The discourse of politeness is thus central in historical understandings of reading associations; but was this the paradigm which contemporaries applied to their activities? Keith Manley has advocated the serious intentions of reading associations: he described subscription libraries as 'havens of learning and literature, providing knowledge rather than entertainment', and argued that book clubs aimed at self-education.¹⁰⁴ St Clair similarly asserted that reading societies were responsible for a 'boom in serious reading'.¹⁰⁵ The cultural valences of reading associations are thus ambiguous. If we are to understand eighteenth-century culture, we must understand the meanings and values attached to practices such as reading and associationalism. Rather than deducing the valence of reading from the books that were read, this thesis focuses on associations' own discourses, in publications and private records, in order to recover their own sentiments and vocabularies.

A final way in which reading associations have been examined is through the history of their readers, following the insight of reception history that the meaning of a text is construed by 'the interaction between its structure and its recipient'.¹⁰⁶ Stephen Colclough, in a close study of the reading practices of Sheffield apprentice Joseph Hunter, argues for the supplementarity of different reading institutions, as he borrowed from circulating and subscription libraries.¹⁰⁷ Colclough argues that readers are an 'active and creative participant

¹⁰⁰ Langford, *Polite*, 91.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁰² Allan, *Nation*, 13, 210.

¹⁰³ Towsey, *Reading*, 57.

¹⁰⁴ K. A. Manley, 'Jeremy Bentham has been Banned: Contention and Censorship in Private Subscription Libraries before 1825', *Library and Information History*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Sept., 2013), 170; K. A. Manley, 'The S.P.C.K. and English Book Clubs before 1720', *The Bodleian Library Record*, Vol. XIII, No. 3 (Oct., 1989), 231-244.

¹⁰⁵ St Clair, *Nation*, 258. See also Langford, *Polite*, 94.

¹⁰⁶ W. Iser, 'Interaction between Text and Reader', in Bennett, *Readers*, 20.

¹⁰⁷ S. Colclough, *Consuming Texts: Readers and Reading Communities, 1695-1870* (Basingstoke, 2007), 100.

in the creation of meaning'.¹⁰⁸ Hunter's reading experience was also conditioned by the information he gleaned about books from periodicals: as such, this associational reader was dependent upon various sources of information and advice about reading practices.¹⁰⁹ Throughout Colclough's work, he emphasises that reading associations 'maintained a public dimension' to reading by their discussion and selection of reading material, and their publication of rules regarding reading practice.¹¹⁰ However, reading associations form a backdrop for his analysis of reading practices, rather than being the focus of his attention throughout the work. Others have hinted at the role which associations played in the creation of reading habits: Vivienne Dunstan suggests that 'it is likely that subscription libraries... were more actively trying to shape the reading patterns of their readers'.¹¹¹ This thesis builds upon this interest in reading associations as an interpretative 'frame', and examines the intentions and effects of associational structures on readers' experiences.

Towsey examines Scottish reading associations as one of the venues in which his Scottish readers encountered and interpreted literature, alongside their private book holdings, circulating libraries, and religious libraries.¹¹² He considers the composition of the reading community, noting that they comprised the 'traditionally literate elements of provincial society', and provided some opportunities for women.¹¹³ He notes their geographic basis, which mingled urban and rural members, and their literary interests, including regional historiography, and the distinctive concerns of the Scottish Enlightenment.¹¹⁴ This analysis of place brings a new nuance to the idea of the 'reading public', charting the physical mechanisms, such as the use of periodicals, which expanded this cultural community.¹¹⁵ However, Towsey's focus on Scotland largely contains the reading nation within this framework, despite the abundance of evidence offered by Allan and others for similar English practices.

This study moves beyond a history of the structures of reading associations, which operates under the assumption that economic imperatives drove associative impulses.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 103.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 111.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 177, 22.

¹¹¹ V. Dunstan, 'Reading Habits in Scotland circa 1750-1820', Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2010, 87.

¹¹² Towsey, *Reading*.

¹¹³ Ibid., 61.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 63, 66, 72, 79, 82-3, 91.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 82-83.

Instead, it relates associational practices and discourses to the values that association members held, and the culture in which they operated. It also analyses these reading association values as evidence of an interpretative 'frame' of readers, contributing to their reception history. There are two important, new structures of this analysis. In order to move beyond Allan's outline of reading associations, this thesis uses categories of analysis such as community, gender and place, instead of examining associations by their structures. Furthermore, the thesis examines both English and Scottish reading associations, to ascertain the degree to which this literary associationalism was a 'British' phenomenon. Historians of reading associations have usually predicated their studies on national units, separating 'English' and 'Scottish' associations, despite these countries' shared language and parliamentary union in this period.¹¹⁶ This has led to assertions of Scottish exceptionality, without research which expressly compares them to their English counterparts: this thesis will redress this lacuna.¹¹⁷

IV. Historiography of Broader Cultural Context

This thesis relates its close study of reading associations to three broader areas of eighteenth-century history: politeness, the Enlightenment and the reading public. The period under investigation is often construed as a 'polite and commercial age', characterised by its preoccupation with taste, sociability and urbanity. Undergirding these cultural changes was a rapid increase in population, prosperity, and empire over the eighteenth century. By the nineteenth century, the predominant historical narrative is that of the rise of science and social reform, as a consequence of urbanisation and industrialisation.

However, this thesis questions historians' separation of these two periods, arguing that eighteenth-century polite associationalism had much in common with the nineteenth-

¹¹⁶ e.g. Allan, *Nation*; Towsey, *Reading*; Manley, *Books*; Dunstan, 'Reading'.

¹¹⁷ Manley, *Books*, 2; St Clair, *Nation*, 251.

century spread of knowledge and education. As 'adaptable' institutions, reading associations were formed in various places with variant features, but this thesis argues that the core model of a literary lending institution formed for mutual aid amongst readers remained popular throughout the period. Whilst associations are thought to have become more formal and bureaucratic over the period,¹¹⁸ this thesis juxtaposes highly-formalised associations from the 1770s with casual book clubs from the 1830s, suggesting there was no linear evolution of associational forms. Indeed, it stretches the perceived heyday of middling-sort associational activism back from the early nineteenth century into the later eighteenth century.¹¹⁹ Membership patterns, particularly the participation of women and families, are shown to have been broadly consistent through the period, rather than dividing sharply between an absence of women in the eighteenth century and their arrival in the nineteenth. This thesis re-evaluates the novelty of nineteenth century associational values and practices, showing that many of their middle-class cultural functions were developed in their eighteenth-century forebears.

a. Associations and Politeness

This thesis examines associations as social formations (the coming together of a community) and as social activities (engaging with wider principles of politeness, leisure, and status creation). Associations were a prevalent feature of Georgian sociability, meeting for a wide range of purposes and pursuits. Their foremost historian, Peter Clark, suggests that they represented a collective form of self-interest, enhancing reputations and providing mutual support.¹²⁰ He describes conversation as 'central' to club activities, fitting in with wider

¹¹⁸ Clark, *Clubs*, 60, 95. See also R. J. Morris, *Class, Sect and Party: The Making of the British Middle Class, Leeds 1820-1850* (Manchester, 1990), 168-169.

¹¹⁹ Davidoff and Hall, *Family*, 419.

¹²⁰ Clark, *Clubs*.

discussions of conversation as a seminal sociable practice in the period.¹²¹ He argues that they emphasised harmony and friendship, as their main purpose was ‘the organisation of neutral public space’.¹²² This tallies with Allan’s analysis of book clubs, as non-factional environments which expressed a desire to rebuild communities after seventeenth-century strife.¹²³ Associations are therefore seen to reflect important social desiderata of their middling-sort members.

The most common conceptual framework into which reading associations are placed by historians is that of politeness.¹²⁴ In studies of the eighteenth century, politeness is a widespread but under-conceptualised descriptor, variously applied to individuals, cultural practices, and national manners. Most famously appearing in the title of Paul Langford’s *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727-1783*, politeness nonetheless failed to merit an entry in the index.¹²⁵ Langford is not alone in using England as the framework for his study of polite mores; conversely, this thesis examines whether politeness was also a Scottish, or indeed British, mode.¹²⁶ Historians have variously suggested that Scottish politeness imitated English culture; that Hume adapted Addisonian politeness in creating the science of man; and that Scotland did not particularly follow English models of politeness.¹²⁷ To further illuminate this contradictory historiography, this thesis compares the values and practices of Scottish and English associations, and considers their relationship to ideas of politeness.

The most assiduous historian of politeness, Lawrence Klein, has identified three key ideas within eighteenth-century usage of the term: sociability, refinement, and gentility.¹²⁸ In

¹²¹ Ibid., 229; J. Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention and Community 1762 to 1830* (Oxford, 2011).

¹²² Clark, *Clubs*, 195, 461.

¹²³ D. Allan, “‘The Advantages of Literature’: The Subscription Library in Georgian Britain”, in A. Crawford (ed.), *The Meaning of the Library: A Cultural History* (Oxford, 2015), 117-118.

¹²⁴ Kelly, *Early*, 125; Allan, *Nation*, 13, 219, 225; Towsey, *Reading*, 57, 66, 87; Allan, “‘The Advantages of Literature’”, 117; L. Klein, ‘Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century’, *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Dec., 2002), 894.

¹²⁵ Langford, *Polite*.

¹²⁶ See also L. E. Klein, ‘Liberty, Manners, and Politeness in Early Eighteenth-Century England’, *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (1989), 583-605; A. N. Walters, ‘Conversation Pieces: Science and Politeness in Eighteenth-Century England’, *History of Science*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Jun., 1997), 121-154.

¹²⁷ D. Allan, *Scotland in the Eighteenth Century: Union and Enlightenment* (London, 2002), 131; N. Phillipson, ‘Politics, Politeness and the Anglicisation of Early Eighteenth-Century Scottish Culture’, in R. A. Mason (ed.), *Scotland and England 1286-1815* (Edinburgh, 1987), 235; R. L. Emerson, *Essays on David Hume, Medical Men and the Scottish Enlightenment: ‘Industry, Knowledge and Humanity’* (Farnham, 2009), 19.

¹²⁸ Klein, ‘Politeness for Plebes’, 365.

its sociable practice, politeness depended on a 'consciousness of form', behaviour such as conversational ease or the exhibition of taste, which in turn signified the refinement and gentility of its practitioners.¹²⁹ For this reason, politeness was a tool in the construction of a genteel image, and Klein thus emphasises that the culture of politeness was not fixed to a single social group, but was an identity which could be aspired to, claimed and performed by all manner of people.¹³⁰ Recent work has sought to consider the converse of this proposition: occasions when people eschewed the culture of politeness. Helen Berry examines 'flash talk', an exclusionary slang deployed in Moll King's coffee house, concluding that its speakers enjoyed consciously transgressing polite codes.¹³¹ Kate Davison suggests a model of 'occasional politeness', citing a party who suppressed their impolite laughter amongst company on a coach trip, only to regale one another with reminiscences later, in private.¹³² Davison thus shows that codes of polite behaviour varied in accordance with the situation, and its maxims were particularly dependent on the social composition of the group at that time. Politeness was not an unchallenged or unquestioned mode of behaviour, and its practitioners were able to deploy or disavow it, in response to their own needs.

This thesis functions as a case study of one realm of cultural activity which has been associated with politeness: reading associations. Reading itself was bound up with self-improvement, and genres of 'polite literature' such as belles lettres and histories were prevalent in this period, contributing to the idea of 'polite learning' or 'rational amusement'. Reading associations illuminate a particular nuance of polite learning: its general, amateur purview, in contrast to the 'pedantry' of the scholar.¹³³ However, it has also been argued that politeness was juxtaposed with 'usefulness': thus, what valence was placed on the reading conducted within these communities?¹³⁴ Furthermore, what other ideas influenced the desire to read, beyond sociability and refinement? This thesis questions the extent to which 'politeness' was the zeitgeist which animated this associational practice, suggesting that the polite paradigm belies the complexity of the way that entertainment, conviviality,

¹²⁹ Klein, 'Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century', 874.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 873; see also Klein, 'Politeness for Plebes', 371-377.

¹³¹ H. Berry, 'Rethinking Politeness in Eighteenth-Century England: Moll King's Coffee House and the Significance of 'Flash Talk'', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 11 (Dec., 2001), 65-81.

¹³² K. Davison, 'Occasional Politeness and Gentlemen's Laughter in Eighteenth Century England', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 57. No. 4 (Dec., 2014), 921-945.

¹³³ Klein, 'Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century', 876.

¹³⁴ Klein, 'Politeness for Plebes', 366.

refinement and improvement were interwoven in contemporary culture. Fears of impoliteness and disruption in reading associations were common: politeness was hard-won, if indeed it was a deliberate aim.

Politeness is seen as fundamentally aspirational and performative, a 'pursuit of genteel status' conducted by the newly-enriched middling sorts.¹³⁵ However, who constituted these 'middling sorts' is ambiguous. Paul Langford suggested one in five families had a qualifying income of £50; Margaret Hunt used statistics which band together a "'middling" bracket' of £80 to £139; and Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall quoted historians' criteria of £100 to several thousands.¹³⁶ Boyd Hilton distinguished between the 'upper-middle class' whose mercantile activities produced a profit which they then invested, and a 'lesser' middle class of manufacturers who regularly needed to borrow capital.¹³⁷ However, all of the middling sorts had to work for their income.¹³⁸ This thesis will use the terminology of the 'middling sorts' to reflect the heterogeneity of the financially-comfortable people involved in associations; they are 'sorts' because they did not become a self-identifying 'class' until the 1820s and 1830s (and even then, references were to pluralistic 'middle classes').¹³⁹

The readers involved in reading associations have been characterised by St Clair as 'the leaders of local life, a social, economic and intellectual elite'.¹⁴⁰ Towsey paints the same picture of Scottish readers, who were drawn from the professional classes.¹⁴¹ This middling-sort membership is consistent with other forms of polite sociability, including assembly rooms and other associations.¹⁴² There is agreement amongst historians that these were middling-sort individuals, due to the costs of participation: book club subscriptions rose from around 10 shillings per annum at the beginning of the period to 20 shillings by the end, and subscription library admissions costs ranged from 3 to 420 shillings, in addition to annual

¹³⁵ Langford, *Polite*, 59.

¹³⁶ Langford, *Polite*, 62; M. R. Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680-1780* (London, 1996), 16; Davidoff and Hall, *Family*, 23.

¹³⁷ Hilton, *Mad*, 159.

¹³⁸ J. Barry, 'Introduction', in J. Barry and C. Brooks (eds), *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550-1800* (Basingstoke, 1994), 17; Davidoff and Hall, *Family*, 20.

¹³⁹ R. J. Morris, *Men, Women and Property in England, 1780-1870: a Social and Economic History of Family Strategies amongst the Leeds Middle Classes* (Cambridge, 2005), 20.

¹⁴⁰ St Clair, *Nation*, 258.

¹⁴¹ Towsey, *Reading*, 61.

¹⁴² H. Berry, 'Creating Polite Space: The Organisation and Social Function of the Newcastle Assembly Rooms', in H. Berry and J. Gregory (eds), *Creating and Consuming Culture in North-East England, 1660-1830* (Aldershot, 2004), 126; Clark, *Clubs*, 151-152, 232.

subscription fees.¹⁴³ Literacy was also likely to be a limiting factor: only 60% of men and 40% of women are estimated to have been literate in 1750,¹⁴⁴ rising to 66% of men and 50% of women in 1830.¹⁴⁵ However, the methods of measuring literacy focus on the evidence of ability to sign (and thus write), whereas the skill of reading is harder to quantify. As reading was taught before writing skills, it is likely that a greater proportion of people had at least a rudimentary ability to read texts.¹⁴⁶ Michael Suarez thus suggests that the adult reading public in England increased by 238% between 1700-1830, and in Scotland by 260%.¹⁴⁷ The reading public was certainly burgeoning through this period as a result of improvements in education, literacy and purchasing power, but reading was not a ubiquitous skill, and associations were by no means universally accessible institutions. They thus provided cultural capital, marking a degree of education and affluence, which enabled the performance of learning and sociability.

Traditionally, a fundamental premise of cultural history of this period was the idea of emulation, which was said to have fuelled the behaviour and consumption of the middling sorts. However, historians have criticised the idea that eighteenth-century middling sorts unquestioningly emulated the gentry, and have instead drawn attention to distinctive middling-sort principles which drove their behaviour.¹⁴⁸ Values such as 'industry, thrift, self-discipline, [and] credit-worthiness' contributed to the self-image of the middling sorts, and enabled them to fill the 'moral vacuum' caused by the debasement of the aristocracy in the American War.¹⁴⁹ They also placed high value on their 'independence', meaning their freedom from political or commercial obligation or dependency, thus rendering them virtuous citizens, although this was a masculine form of middling-sort identity.¹⁵⁰

However, it is difficult to establish the degree of mutual identification between the 'middling sorts' who shared these principles, and indeed whether these values were particularly indigenous to this social grouping. Associations are one way of examining a

¹⁴³ Allan, *Nation*, 45, 92.

¹⁴⁴ Brewer, *Pleasures*, 167.

¹⁴⁵ M. F. Suarez, 'Introduction', in M. F. Suarez, S. J. Michael and M. L. Turner (eds), *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain: Volume 5 1695-1830* (Cambridge, 2009), 11.

¹⁴⁶ J. Barry, 'Literacy and Literature in Popular Culture: Reading and Writing in Historical Perspective', in Harris, *Popular Culture*, 76.

¹⁴⁷ Suarez, 'Introduction', in Suarez *et al.*, *Cambridge History*, 12.

¹⁴⁸ Hunt, *Middling Sort*, 4-5.

¹⁴⁹ Barry, 'Introduction', in Barry and Brooks, *Middling Sort*, 15; Hilton, *Mad*, 151.

¹⁵⁰ M. McCormack, *The Independent Man: Citizenship and Gender Politics in Georgian England* (Manchester, 2005); Hunt, *Middling Sort*, 20.

learned culture shared by middling-sort, gentry and aristocratic participants, and the ways that the members interacted with one another. Jonathan Barry argued that associations arose in spite of the diversity within the middling sorts, and the 'flux' of urban life.¹⁵¹ Associations drew together propertied people across occupational divides, emphasising middling-sort economic principles as well as 'collective virtues' of civic community.¹⁵² R. J. Morris similarly suggested that associations enabled middling sorts to work together 'without having to resolve the contradictions of their ideology', and were thus 'the basis for the formation of middle-class identity'.¹⁵³ In the widest view, networks of associations as well as periodical literature connected middling sorts to their nationwide brethren, and united them in a 'common experience' which formed the basis of their class consciousness.¹⁵⁴ However, these studies primarily focus on urban institutions, positing an intimate connection between associations and their 'urban place' and demography.¹⁵⁵ How do reading associations, which flourished in a variety of locales, fit into this paradigm? To what extent did they unite middling sorts within their community, and create an awareness of a nationwide similitude between readers?

Furthermore, Morris elsewhere outlined a difference between 'patronage' societies which sponsored the welfare of other social groups, and 'membership' societies which focused on the betterment of their own members.¹⁵⁶ Brian Lewis differentiated between professional, patriotic, religious, political, and cultural associations, suggesting that the latter (which would include reading associations) facilitated 'group cohesion'.¹⁵⁷ Reading associations are paradigmatic 'membership' associations, providing a library service for their members alone. Their role in generating an awareness of social difference, by explicit attempts to improve 'other' groups, is thus weakened. Nonetheless, it is clear that associations were forms of 'conspicuous contribution', which served to assert the status of

¹⁵¹ J. Barry, 'Bourgeois Collectivism? Urban Association and the Middling Sort', in Barry and Brooks, *Middling Sort*, 89.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 89, 98.

¹⁵³ Morris, *Class*, 13; R. J. Morris, 'Voluntary Societies and British Urban Elites, 1780-1850: An Analysis', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Mar., 1983), 96. See also J. Money, *Experience and Identity: Birmingham and the West Midlands, 1760-1800* (Manchester, 1977), 99.

¹⁵⁴ Morris, 'Voluntary Societies', 103-104; Morris, *Men*, 342.

¹⁵⁵ Morris, *Men*, 340-341; Morris, 'Voluntary Societies', 109, 112.

¹⁵⁶ Morris, *Class*, 191-192.

¹⁵⁷ B. Lewis, *The Middlemost and the Milltowns: Bourgeois Culture and Politics in Early Industrial England* (Stanford, 2001), 269.

their members.¹⁵⁸ What social effects did reading associations have, and what values did their members seek to display? This thesis will explore how associations contributed to the social status of their members by demonstrating their possession of knowledge; their involvement with local improvement; their status as members of the reading public; and their participation in a national cultural community.

b. Values of Enlightenment, Improvement and Progress

'The Enlightenment' is a key term employed by historians of the eighteenth century, traditionally referring to the work of French philosophers such as Voltaire, Diderot and Montesquieu.¹⁵⁹ The central concept of this new intellectual climate was a belief in mankind's critical faculties and ability to reach rational understanding. This questioning and active approach to knowledge led to a 'social ethic' of improvement, progress and self-betterment, and for this reason the Enlightenment is increasingly being examined as a wider mentality rather than simply a high-intellectual movement.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, the Scottish Enlightenment's focus on 'man as a moral and social being' gave philosophical import to empathy, fellowship, and sociable practices.¹⁶¹ Roy Porter summarises that 'to be enlightened, a gentleman had to be sociable'.¹⁶² Clubs and associations are therefore an important environment in which ordinary people could engage with enlightened ideas and behaviours.

Richard Sher defines enlightenment values as a commitment to moral, spiritual and material improvement, sensibility and fellow-feeling, sociability, tolerance, intellectualism and

¹⁵⁸ Lewis, *Middlemost*, 248; Morris, *Class*, 228.

¹⁵⁹ J. Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760* (Cambridge, 2005), 2. This thesis will capitalise the 'Enlightenment' as a noun, but use the lowercase for enlightenment as an adjective.

¹⁶⁰ G. Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: the British, French, and American Enlightenments* (London, 2008), 5; D. Daiches, 'The Scottish Enlightenment', in D. Daiches, P. Jones, and J. Jones (eds), *A Hotbed of Genius: The Scottish Enlightenment, 1730-1790* (Edinburgh, 1986), 2.

¹⁶¹ Daiches, 'Scottish Enlightenment', 24; T. Ahnert and S. Manning, 'Introduction: Character, Self, and Sociability in the Scottish Enlightenment', in T. Ahnert and S. Manning (eds), *Character, Self and Sociability in the Scottish Enlightenment* (New York, 2011), 6.

¹⁶² Porter, *Enlightenment*, 22.

appreciation of the arts.¹⁶³ Bob Harris describes Scottish provincial enlightenment as utilitarian, focusing on intellectual and moral benefits, manners and taste, and expressing provincial urban self-confidence.¹⁶⁴ Such descriptions characterise the 'spirit of the age', but were equally modes of behaviour for individuals. Specific examples of enlightenment-era intellectual culture confirm a new accessibility and public orientation: Rosemary Sweet suggests that antiquarianism was portrayed in this period as promoting the public good in order to confirm its practitioners' status as gentleman.¹⁶⁵ Jan Golinski similarly argued that the new discipline of chemistry was portrayed as a 'public asset', and the openness of experiments and their replicability was key to chemistry's status as public science.¹⁶⁶ Knowledge and scholarship were thus presented as part of a wider, societal pursuit of improvement, in contrast to the exclusive, courtly scholarship of former times. The print revolution by which enlightenment ideas were disseminated tied into the commercial revolution, and can ultimately be connected to the rise of the middling sorts.¹⁶⁷

How did these ideas of enlightenment relate to the social phenomenon of associations, which grew exponentially through the eighteenth century? 'Improvement' is a consistent theme in cultural analysis of the period, and Paul Langford suggested that associations 'expressed the contemporary interest in practical enlightenment'.¹⁶⁸ Brewer argued that the philosophical implications of sociability meant that it was 'itself a form of self-improvement', binding the intellectual aims of associations with their inherently sociable methods.¹⁶⁹ Reading associations thus drew on ideas about the importance of reading, as well as their enlightened social values. A third strand of their intellectual promise was in their practical relationship to commerce: Brewer suggested that the Liverpool, Manchester and Bristol libraries specialised in literature relating to their local industries.¹⁷⁰ However, science was part of 'a diverse package of polite cultural pursuits', and reading associations were not

¹⁶³ R. B. Sher, *The Enlightenment & the Book: Scottish Authors and their Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Ireland and America* (London, 2006), 16-17.

¹⁶⁴ B. Harris, 'Cultural Change in Provincial Scottish Towns, c. 1700-1820', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Mar., 2011), 119.

¹⁶⁵ R. Sweet, *Antiquaries: The Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London, 2004), 31, 34.

¹⁶⁶ Golinski, *Science*, 7-8, 35-36, 66, 138.

¹⁶⁷ Harris noted that the commercialisation of leisure, polite culture, improvement and enlightenment are often 'fused together', in B. Harris, 'The Enlightenment, Towns and Urban Society in Scotland, c. 1760-1820', *English Historical Review*, Vol. CXXVI, No. 522 (Oct., 2011), 1099.

¹⁶⁸ Langford, *Polite*, 615. See also Harris, 'Cultural Change', 139.

¹⁶⁹ Brewer, *Pleasures*, 512.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 180.

‘utilitarian’.¹⁷¹ Improvement, within the eighteenth-century polite paradigm, included personal, social, intellectual and moral advances, and was cast as an inherently sociable process. This social aspect made knowledge and status-creation inseparable: self-improvement was configured within the genteel paradigm of polite learning, and had not yet taken on its associations of raw, technical knowledge, or working-class respectability.

Whilst ‘scientific’ associations have been assessed in various studies, reading associations are often characterised as passive recipients of knowledge, more focused on sociability, and have rarely been examined as learned communities.¹⁷² This thesis will suggest that reading associations were by no means passive recipients of enlightenment knowledge. Equally, a ‘scientific’ focus was no guarantee of active research or publication, meaning a stark differentiation of ‘active’ and ‘passive’ contributors to the intellectual community should not be drawn simply by the disciplinary focus of the association.¹⁷³ Within the panoply of associational forms, reading associations seem consonant with broader emphases on improvement, although geared more towards self-improvement and mutual aid rather than to external social reform. This thesis forms a case study of one category of association, seeking to assess the reliability of Clark’s broader analysis when applied to a single branch which was particularly invested in a traditional mode of self-improvement. It provides a thick description of the range of purposes and practices within one form of association, and relates these to the specific contexts of reading and knowledge, status-creation through intellect and the creation of local and national publics.

Eighteenth-century associations are often considered within paradigms of sociability, relying on the individual efforts of well-meaning improvers, whereas nineteenth-century institutions are linked to a broader and more ineluctable widening of public discourse about science, and the extension of ‘knowledge’ in new social groups, with political effects. This reflects the nineteenth-century’s own perception of a change from eighteenth-century ‘frivolity’ to their own ethic of ‘work and probity’.¹⁷⁴ Knowledge was translated into ‘popular

¹⁷¹ Borsay, *Urban Renaissance*, 137; Brewer, *Pleasures*, 181.

¹⁷² Golinski, *Science*; J. E. McClellan, *Science Reorganized: Scientific Societies in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1985); J. S. Uglow, *The Lunar Men: The Friends Who Made the Future, 1730-1810* (London, 2002); P. Elliott, *The Derby Philosophers: Science and Culture in British Urban Society, 1700-1850* (Manchester, 2009).

¹⁷³ Elliott, *Derby*, 74.

¹⁷⁴ C. Matthew, ‘Introduction: the United Kingdom and the Victorian Century, 1815-1901’, in C. Matthew (ed.), *The Nineteenth Century. The British Isles: 1815-1901* (Oxford, 2000), 4-5.

science' in the 1820s and 1830s, and 'useful' (artisanal) and 'common' knowledge were linked to a growing working-class interest in self-improvement and independence.¹⁷⁵ Workers' pursuit of 'respectable knowledge' was understood through a 'narrative of intellectual and moral progress', and knowledge more generally was historicized as a process of 'progress'.¹⁷⁶ The 'march of intellect' amongst the working people was said to be a popular 'improving aesthetic' and a 'conceptual framework' of 1819-1834.¹⁷⁷ Narratives of nineteenth-century intellectual cultures thus pass the baton of self-improvement to working-class readers, and contrast their intellectual hunger with the leisured learning of their eighteenth-century forebears.

The nineteenth century is also described as an era of science, witnessing the inauguration of new analytical procedures, professionalisation and disciplinary differentiation, with the development of specialised scientific societies and periodicals.¹⁷⁸ Richard Yeo suggested that science, and the inductive, observational approach it represented, was still subordinate to classical and theological intellectual activities at the turn of the century.¹⁷⁹ Yet by the 1820s and 1830s, James Secord argues, reading scientific works was seen as 'a remedy for the country's social, political and religious malaise'.¹⁸⁰ Science works encouraged behaviour based on reason (which is an interesting inversion of the eighteenth-century paradigm of public sphere participation justified by the ability to exercise reason), and he characterised scientific works as 'conduct manuals' for rational behaviours and epistemologies, primarily purchased by the middle classes.¹⁸¹ However, the new cultural

¹⁷⁵ J. R. Topham, 'Publishing "Popular Science" in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain', in A. Fyfe and B. Lightman (eds), *Science in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century Sites and Experiences* (Chicago, 2007), 135; P. Burke, *What is the History of Knowledge?* (Cambridge, 2016), 95-96; J. Garnett, 'Religious and Intellectual Life', in Matthew, *The Nineteenth Century*, 211; J. A. Secord, *Visions of Science: Books and Readers at the Dawn of the Victorian Age* (Oxford, 2014), 13.

¹⁷⁶ D. S. K. J. Magee, 'Popular Periodicals, Common Readers and the "Grand March of Intellect" in London, 1819-34', Unpublished DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford, 2008, 2; Burke, *What is the History of Knowledge?*, 4.

¹⁷⁷ Magee, 'Popular Periodicals', 5, 30.

¹⁷⁸ M. Daunt, 'Introduction', in M. Daunt (ed.), *The Organisation of Knowledge in Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 2005), 13; A. Fyfe and B. Lightman, 'Science in the Marketplace: An Introduction', in Fyfe and Lightman, *Science in the Marketplace*, 3; P. Burke, 'The Polymath: a Cultural and Social History of an Intellectual Species', in D. F. Smith and H. Philsooph (eds), *Explorations in Cultural History: Essays for Peter Gabriel McCaffery* (Aberdeen, 2010), 75; J. A. Secord, 'How Scientific Conversation Became Shop Talk', in Fyfe and Lightman, *Science in the Marketplace*, 27; McClellan, *Science Reorganized*, xx; Topham, 'Publishing Popular Science', in Fyfe and Lightman, *Science in the Marketplace*, 152-153.

¹⁷⁹ R. Yeo, *Defining Science: William Whewell, Natural Knowledge, and Public Debate in Early Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 1993), 32-33.

¹⁸⁰ Secord, *Visions*, 2-3.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 81, 238, 244.

importance of science in the early nineteenth century is often represented as the rise of 'knowledge' in general, rather than a specific scientific method. Alan Rauch suggests that knowledge became a valuable commodity, systematised in encyclopaedias and in scientific theories in the nineteenth century.¹⁸² His periodisation of this growing reverence for 'knowledge' is ambiguous, as he includes (eighteenth-century) phenomena of periodicals, libraries and institutions such as the Lunar Society as part of this knowledge landscape.¹⁸³ The separation of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptions of knowledge, and a new nineteenth-century belief in its transformative power, is thus doubtful. Instead, Daniel Headrick characterised a 'growing thirst for knowledge' as a shared eighteenth- and nineteenth-century trait, which this thesis supports.¹⁸⁴

Within learned societies, there was a shift towards scientific experimentation and research in the early nineteenth century, with the development of 'literary and scientific' institutions which provided lectures and laboratories as well as library facilities. The provision of lectures was a central feature of nineteenth-century scientific associations, sharing knowledge through performances and presentations rather than simply through the medium of books.¹⁸⁵ Yet the reading association remained a common, contemporaneous format, as shown in the Ayr Library which continued alongside its offshoot mechanics' institute in the 1820s, the Wye Book Club, the records of which exist from 1755 to 1860, and the numerous foundations and operations of book clubs and library societies in the 1820s.¹⁸⁶ Mechanics' institutes and literary and scientific societies thus supplemented, but did not replace, traditional reading associations.

This thesis suggests that conceptions of knowledge, including its perceived utility in manufacturing and its social and moral values, were not new in the nineteenth century, but rather drew upon the middling-sort ideas which reading associations had purveyed for decades. The nuances of the middling readers' conceptions of knowledge therefore merit

¹⁸² A. Rauch, *Useful Knowledge: The Victorians, Morality, and the March of Intellect* (London, 2001), 9, 14, 35.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 22, 59.

¹⁸⁴ D. R. Headrick, *When Information Came of Age: Technologies of Knowledge in the Age of Reason and Revolution, 1700-1850* (Oxford, 2000), 12.

¹⁸⁵ M. D. Stephens and G. W. Roderick, 'Science, the Working Classes and Mechanics' Institutes', *Annals of Science*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (1972), 354; Rauch, *Useful*, 59.

¹⁸⁶ e.g. Haworth (1820); G. Burrell, *A Catalogue of the Library of the Athenaeum, Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1820); Kirkcudbright (1824); Hull (1822); Edinburgh (1823); OHC, Budd. XIV/2 Woodstock Book Society 1822.

further exploration. What was the relationship of knowledge to entertainment within reading associations over this period? Were their interests dependent upon the economic contexts and circumstances of each association, defining knowledge by its immediate utility and application to the community, or did they subscribe to universalising ideas of ‘gentlemanly’ or classical learning?

c. The Reading Public and Culture

The ‘public’ audience of cultural activities is portrayed as expanding and developing from the eighteenth century onwards, and was a dynamic element of changing social relations and cultural activity.¹⁸⁷ The ‘public sphere’ was most comprehensively theorised by Jürgen Habermas, as a bourgeois realm of activity, in which individuals came together to pass critical judgements by use of reason.¹⁸⁸ It took a variety of institutional forms such as coffeehouses and book clubs, but Habermas outlined the unifying principles of these ‘public sphere’ locations: all members interacted as equals, they were interested in art and culture which were thus dissociated from establishment control, and the topics under discussion were general and accessible to all.¹⁸⁹ James Van Horn Melton later glossed the public as those engaged in ‘rational and critical discussion’ on any topic, arbitrated by reason, and opposed to secrecy.¹⁹⁰ Elements of Habermas’ configuration of the public sphere, including its ‘bourgeois’ and ‘accessible’ nature, have been challenged, although others have

¹⁸⁷ On a growing cultural space, see Van Horn Melton, *Rise*; T. Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture: Old Regime Europe 1660-1789* (Oxford, 2002); H. Berry, *Gender, Society and Print Culture in Late Stuart England: The Cultural World of the Athenian Mercury* (Aldershot, 2003), 6-17. On a growing reading public, see Langford, *Polite*, 91; Suarez, ‘Introduction’, in Suarez *et al.*, *Cambridge History* 11-12; J. Raven, ‘The Book as a Commodity’, in Suarez *et al.*, *Cambridge History*, 83-117.

¹⁸⁸ J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, 1989).

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

¹⁹⁰ Van Horn Melton, *Rise*, 7-8.

suggested that Habermas was outlining an ideal rather than an historical reality.¹⁹¹ This study seeks to test Habermas' model in relation to reading associations, which he and others have closely associated with the public sphere.¹⁹² This thesis argues that associations' configuration of members as participants of the reading public built upon ideas of citizenship, property and honour, and these factors were able to supersede political differences. This thesis also shows that the 'public sphere' of associational life was accessible to women, and indeed suggests that family and associational life were closely intertwined.

In addition, a more subtle assumption within the public sphere thesis is that these readers conceived of themselves and their actions as constitutive of the reading public. Timothy Blanning noted 'the formation of a collective entity which saw itself as "the public"', echoing the implicit self-awareness of Habermas' description of the public as a 'critical judge' and Van Horn Melton's labels of the public as an 'arbiter' and 'tribunal'.¹⁹³ This suggests that the public was a self-conscious entity, aware of their new cultural function and agency. This takes a category of analysis (the conceptualisation of a social structure organised into public and private, 'the public' and the individual) and makes it a category of practice, assuming its pertinence to the everyday experience of historical actors.¹⁹⁴ This thesis will examine this proposition through reading associations: to what extent did they see themselves as part of the reading public? What did 'the public' mean to them?

A broader aim of this thesis is to consider how associations illuminate the wider operations of contemporary culture: who controlled culture, and by what mechanisms? Furthermore, what was the geography of culture? The eighteenth century is a period for which 'culture' can first be regarded as an industry or a commodity, as a range of 'cultural wares' developed alongside the proliferation of commercial goods.¹⁹⁵ The 'commercialization' which society underwent meant that culture became a commodity.¹⁹⁶ In literature, the 'culture

¹⁹¹ Blanning, *Culture*, 12; K. M. Baker, 'Defining the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France: Variations of a Theme by Habermas', in C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (London, 1996), 181-211; D. Zaret, 'Religion, Science, and Printing in the Public Spheres in Seventeenth-Century England', in Calhoun, *Habermas*, 212.

¹⁹² Habermas, *Structural*, 51; Van Horn Melton, *Rise*, 115.

¹⁹³ Blanning, *Culture*, 135; Habermas, *Structural*, 2; Van Horn Melton, *Rise*, 2.

¹⁹⁴ On categories of practice and analysis, see R. Brubaker and F. Cooper, 'Beyond "Identity"', *Theory and Society*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Feb., 2000), 4.

¹⁹⁵ T. Lovell, 'Subjective Powers? Consumption, the Reading Public, and Domestic Woman in Early Eighteenth-Century England', in Bermingham and Brewer, *Consumption*, 25.

¹⁹⁶ D. Wahrman, 'National Society, Communal Culture: An Argument about the Recent Historiography of Eighteenth-Century Britain', *Social History*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Jan., 1992), 45.

industry' was epitomised by the development of literary criticism.¹⁹⁷ Reading association practice sheds light on the ambiguous role of periodicals, which have been suggested to be a 'primary constituent of the emergent bourgeois public sphere'.¹⁹⁸ Reviewers imposed standards of taste, which evaluated authors' productions whilst also providing a critical guideline for readers.¹⁹⁹ Allan argues that reading associations were eager to assimilate the guidelines of taste which review journals purveyed.²⁰⁰ Furthermore, he regards associations' copying of others' rules as evidence of their desire to 'co-opt rather than challenge the familiar conventions of polite associationalism'.²⁰¹ This narrative homogenises the interests of associational readers, suggesting they subordinated themselves to central dictates of taste, which emanated from the metropolitan review journals. Were associations, and readers themselves, just clones of this 'high' culture?

In another view, reviewers were depicted as 'officers of the literary police'; the (self-appointed) authorities of the reading public, a half-way house between creating opinions and voicing those of others.²⁰² How did the reading public relate itself to these authorities? Within associations themselves, the role of regulation was often taken on by a committee, and associational rules imposed strict limits on reading experience. This thesis argues that the authority structures of the reading association constrained and regulated behaviour, but also legitimated provincial readers as part of the reading public. Their imposition of 'order' was a practical and moral programme. The clear frameworks and corporate practices of associations gave individual readers more cultural weight and authority, within their local community and as an authorised part of an anonymous public.

The geography of culture, meaning its central nodes and patterns of diffusion, can explain the nuances of that culture: for example, relating its values to patterns of habitation, or environmental features. Historians of eighteenth-century Britain have traditionally characterised it by its focus on London, with provincial towns coming to rival London by their

¹⁹⁷ See Allan, *Making British Culture*, 25.

¹⁹⁸ T. Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism* (London, 2000), 17.

¹⁹⁹ F. Donoghue, 'Colonizing Readers. Review Criticism and the Formation of a Reading Public', in Bermingham and Brewer, *Consumption*, 54-74.

²⁰⁰ Allan, *Making British Culture*, 29.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

²⁰² A. Forster, 'Review Journals and the Reading Public', in Rivers, *Books*, 184.

economic progress.²⁰³ On a broader level, the model can be characterised as internal colonialism, with the centre controlling the economic success and culture of the periphery.²⁰⁴ However, this model has been questioned: the 'binary polarity' of metropolis and provinces has been contested, and variation in 'provincial' experience has been noted.²⁰⁵ Sub-categories of 'provincial' life, such as county towns, shared particular economic and juridico-political conditions which encouraged, according to Paul Elliott, antiquarian literary and philosophical interests, in contrast to the 'utilitarian' science interests of industrial towns and ports.²⁰⁶ Locality was also a strong force: Helen Berry suggested that although the patrons of the Newcastle Assembly Rooms participated in a 'national taste for polite sociability', they drew on local architects, local funds and local families.²⁰⁷ Ina Ferris argued that book clubs were part of a regional community and communications circuit, rather than simple termini of culture which emanated from the metropolis.²⁰⁸ The failings of the macro schema, and the weak explanatory power of local individuality, have been reconciled by Dror Wahrman, who posited that individuals could choose between 'national society' and 'an alternative polymorphous communal-provincial culture'.²⁰⁹ He argued that associations could promote 'national', inclusive values of politeness, or could strengthen localist identity and agency, as in the case of philanthropy by one set of residents towards another.²¹⁰ This study of reading associations will provide a greater understanding of how provincial individuals configured their relationship to local and national culture, and the mechanisms by which broader identifications were achieved.

This thesis addresses the identities of reading association members on three levels. Firstly, the values of reading associations and their members are examined through their

²⁰³ Barry, 'Bourgeois Collectivism', 87; A. Wilson "'The Florence of the North'? The Civic Culture of Liverpool in the Early Nineteenth Century', in A. J. Kidd and D. Nicholls (eds), *Gender, Civic Culture, and Consumerism: Middle-Class Identity in Britain, 1800-1940* (Manchester, 1999), 35; Hilton, *Mad*, 169, 171.

²⁰⁴ M. Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536-1966* (London, 1975).

²⁰⁵ H. Berry and J. Gregory, 'Introduction', in Berry and Gregory, *Creating and Consuming Culture*, 10; I. Inkster, 'Introduction: Aspects of the History of Science and Science Culture in Britain, 1780-1850 and Beyond', in I. Inkster and J. Morrell (eds), *Metropolis and Province: Science in British Culture, 1780-1850* (London, 1983), 34.

²⁰⁶ P. Elliott, 'Towards a Geography of English Scientific Culture: Provincial Identity and Literary and Philosophical Culture in the English County Town, 1750-1850', *Urban History*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Dec., 2005), 391-412.

²⁰⁷ Berry, 'Creating Polite Space', 138.

²⁰⁸ Ferris, *Book-Men*, 121.

²⁰⁹ Wahrman, 'National Society', 43-72.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

construction, practices and representations. Secondly, reading associations are situated within local, civic cultures, as an intermediary 'parochial' location which connected domestic and public spheres. Thirdly, associations are considered in national context, presenting the similarity and mutual awareness of English and Scottish associations as evidence of a broader middling-sort cultural commonality.

V. Method and Sources

This thesis provides a comparative study of the culture and practices of reading communities in England and Scotland. Associations are examined as an interpretative context, which firstly provides an insight into collective reading practices, and secondly into the members' wider understandings of reading, sociability, and culture. Associations were 'systems of constraints controlling interpretive activity', yet were also founded and policed by the same readers that they are said to constrain.²¹¹ They were thus an expression of middling-sort ideas, and an apparatus for their perpetuation.

The research materials for this thesis contain references to over 400 separate reading associations in England and Scotland. This thesis primarily draws upon the manuscript records of 25 reading associations, selected to provide a systematic survey across geographical, chronological and organisational type. These sources are supplemented by printed documents from 57 other reading associations, over 100 magazine and newspaper references, and over 200 associational listings in book subscription lists.

The records of nine associations were selected to form the backbone of this analysis, as they are rich archives which show the workings of subscription libraries and book clubs in a variety of geographical settings across the period, and have hitherto had little or nothing written about them. The manuscript transactions and minutes of the Exeter Library Society

²¹¹ V. B. Leitch, 'Reader-Response Criticism', in Bennett, *Readers*, 39.

(1776), the Hull Subscription Library (1776), the Sedbergh Book Club (1782), the Eclectic Book Society of London (1813), and the Dursley Reading Society (1818) provide a picture of the varieties of English associational life, in a county town, port, rural village, metropolis, and wool-town. The manuscript records of the Ayr Library Society (1762), the Greenock Library (1794), the Wigtown Subscription Library (1795) and the Kilmarnock Public Library (1797) were chosen as counterpart Scottish studies, of a variety of types of town.²¹²

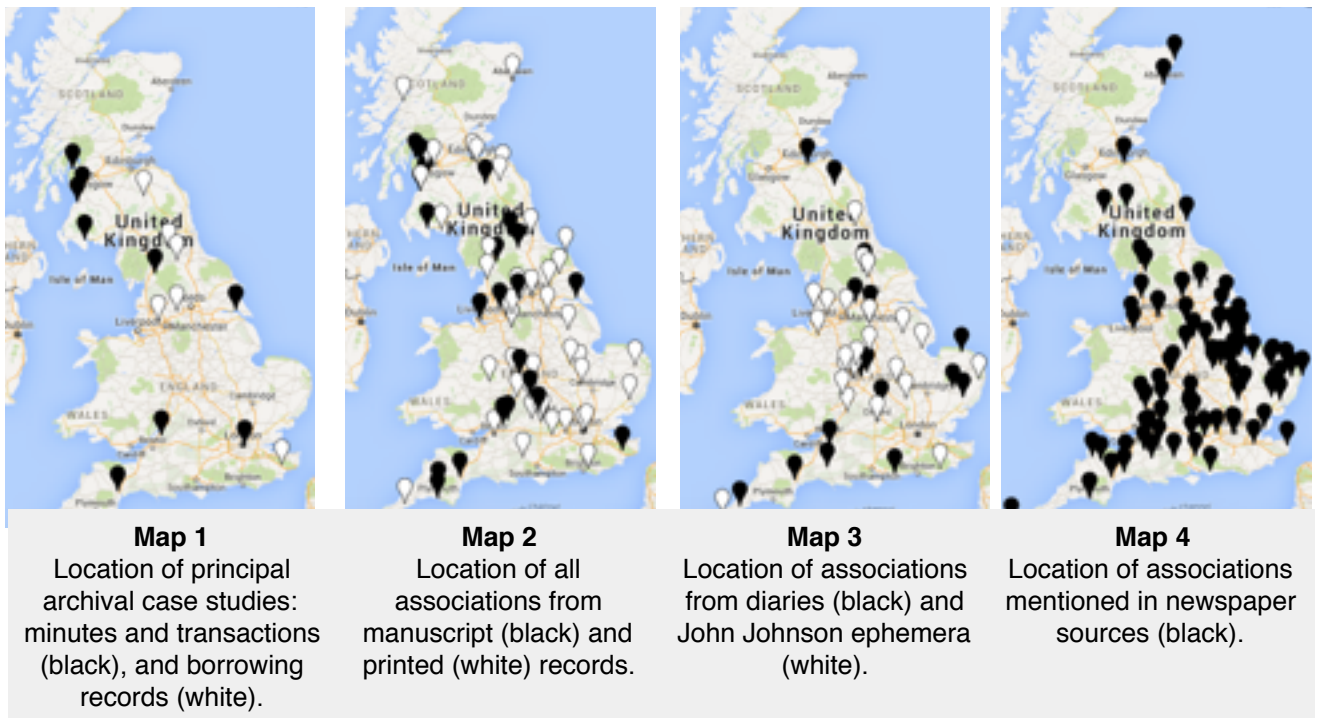
This geographical and temporal coverage allows for an understanding of the dynamics of culture across England and Scotland in this period, although it is important to consider how these divergent examples can be fruitfully compared. Is a rural English book club from the 1770s really comparable with an urban Scottish subscription library in the 1820s? This thesis employs several axes of comparison in order to consider the nuanced patterns within this associational spectrum. The first three chapters justify the simultaneous treatment of book clubs and subscription libraries by demonstrating their similar interests, aims and practices. Chapter six focuses on the 'local' aspect of associational life in order to attend to reading associations' unique circumstances as well as their cultural commonality. Similarly, English and Scottish associations, which are treated separately in the historiography, are here placed alongside one another. This is justified by chapter seven, which evaluates their contribution to 'national' culture.²¹³

As well as providing records of the societies' transactions, many of these archival sources were selected for their ability to provide insight into other features of associational life. The records of the Ayr, Dursley, Eclectic, Exeter and Greenock associations were further examined for their book acquisitions, supplemented by the extant receipts of the Caledonian Book Society of Bolton (1806). Borrowing records, the most elusive source in library history, were drawn from the records of the Dursley Reading Society, as well as the Wye Book Club (1755), the Westgate Library (1788), the Luddenden Circulating Library (1798), the Selkirk Subscription Library (1799), and the Barnard Castle Book Club (1819). Map 1 demonstrates the geographical coverage of this set of manuscript sources.

Printed records of a further 57 institutions were used to supplement the evidence drawn from manuscript records (see Map 2). These printed records often contain rules and

²¹² See descriptions in Harris and McKean, *The Scottish Town*, 44-46.

²¹³ A full chapter outline is given on pages 48-49.



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regulations, which explain how associations were constructed and the principles which they sought to embody, which is explored in chapters three and four. Membership lists within these printed sources also allow for the largest extant tabulation of membership across associations, which is employed in chapter five's examination of gender and family within associations.

There is a danger in focusing solely on the associations' own self-representations, for it could be argued that these written records simply recycled prevalent contemporary discourses, thus being derivative rather than constitutive of cultural meanings; nonetheless, this thesis suggests that this proves the cultural 'resonance' of these values. There may also be a disjuncture between the discourse of reading associations and their actual behaviours. For this reason, the static and idealised outline of associational practice given in rulebooks is supplemented by the archival minutes, receipts, and order lists, which provide an insight into associational transactions and negotiations. However, this still gives an institutional perspective, and takes at face value the claims of these associations to be 'reading' communities: it must be acknowledged that ordering or even borrowing a book is not proof that it was read, although the same difficulty is faced by historians when using book

ownership as evidence of reading.²¹⁴ The picture which these sources provide prioritises associational rhetoric and self-conception over individual members' understandings or external impressions. It is assumed that, by subscribing, they agreed to (and founder members had been involved in instituting) the values of the association; but the degree to which they enacted these at home is difficult to determine.

To give a more rounded impression of the meanings and practices of association, this thesis also draws upon seventeen printed and two manuscript diaries kept by people who belonged to reading associations, covering every decade from 1760-1830 (see map 3).²¹⁵ This thesis also uses representations of reading associations from newspapers (map 4), fiction, poetry, book subscription lists, and other ephemeral sources such as the 26 associational bookplates in the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera at the Bodleian Library. This seeks to recover the 'field of representation' within which associational meanings were constructed, providing a wide-ranging understanding of the way they (and others) represented their values. Inevitably, the sources for this thesis do not encompass every printed representation of reading associations which was available to contemporaries; but the range and number of sources establishes the prevalence of certain tropes across a representative sample. It also provides a new approach to reading association history, by consistently integrating these cultural artefacts of their representation with the associations' own documents of their practice.

²¹⁴ J. Fergus, *Provincial Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 2006), 37.

²¹⁵ *A Truly Honest Man: The Diary of Joseph Moxon of Market Bosworth 1798 and 1799*, ed. P. J. Foss and T. Parry (Macclesfield, 1998); *Diary of George Ridpath, Minister of Stitchel, 1755-1761*, ed. J. Balfour Paul (Edinburgh, 1922); 'Diary of George Sandy, Apprentice', ed. C. A. Malcolm, in *The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, Vol. 24 (Edinburgh, 1942), 1-69; *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson, Barrister-at-Law, F.S.A.*, ed. T. Sadler, 2 Vols (London, 1872), i; *Diaries of William Johnston Temple, 1780-1796*, ed. L. Bettany (Oxford, 1929); *Paupers and Pig Killers: The Diary of William Holland, A Somerset Parson 1799-1818*, ed. J. Ayres (Gloucester, 1984); *Peeps into the Past being Passages from the Diary of Thomas Asline Ward*, ed. A. B. Bell (Sheffield, 1909); H. Sandford, *Thomas Poole and his Friends*, 2 Vols (London, 1888), i; *The Diary of Benjamin Newton, Rector of Wath, 1816-1818*, ed. C. P. Fendall and E. A. Crutchley (Cambridge, 1933); *The Diary of John Longe (1765-1834) Vicar of Coddenham*, ed. M. Stone (Woodbridge, 2008); *The Diary of Mary Hardy 1773-1809*, ed. M. Bird, 4 Vols (Kingston-upon-Thames, 2013), iii and iv; *The Grove Diaries: The Rise and Fall of an English Family 1809-1925*, ed. D. Hawkins (Wimborne, 1995); *The John Marsh Journals: The Life and Times of a Gentleman Composer (1752-1828)*, ed. B. Robins (Stuyvesant, 1998); *The John Marsh Journals: The Life and Times of a Gentleman Composer (1752-1828) Volume II*, ed. B. Robins (Hillsdale, 2013); *The Journal of Samuel Curwen, Loyalist*, ed. A. Oliver, 2 Vols (Cambridge, MA, 1972); *The Oakes Diaries: Business, Politics and the Family in Bury St Edmunds 1778-1827*, ed. J. Fiske, 2 Vols (Woodbridge, 1990-1991); *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*, ed. H. Whitbread (London, 2010); *Two Yorkshire Diaries. The Diary of Arthur Jessop and Ralph Ward's Journal*, ed. C. E. Whiting (The Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series, Vol. CXVII, 1952). BOD, MS. Eng. misc. e. 200 John Greenhill Diary and OHC, P366/J/1 Diary of John Greenhill 1793-1800; WCRO, CR2795/3 Ludford Journal.

Many of the manuscript sources used in this thesis have only been briefly mentioned in the existing historiography, if at all; neither Allan nor St Clair speak of the Greenock Library, the Selkirk Subscription Library, the Kilmarnock Public Library, or the Plymouth Public Library. The Dursley Reading Society, Westgate Library and Wye Book Club records have never been used before. Of the printed sources, 25 have been used by neither St Clair nor Allan.²¹⁶ New Scottish sources which were not examined by Towsey have been unearthed, such as the *Catalogue of the Paisley Theological Library*, the *Catalogue of the Fort William Subscription Library*, and the historical records of the Kilmarnock Library.²¹⁷ Whilst many of the other Scottish sources have been used by Towsey in his overview of enlightenment reading culture, this is the first time that such a broad body of English and Scottish reading association sources have been considered together in one overarching study. The range of source types, including minute books, catalogues, printed ephemera, diaries and correspondence, newspapers, fiction and poetry, provides the most detailed archival survey yet attempted of the reading association phenomenon.

There are, of course, lacunae in this treatment of reading associations, and other facets and implications which could be examined. Although it considers individual members in terms of their self-ascribed status and political affiliations, it leaves the task of illuminating the place of religion in reading motivations, or in community creation, to future researchers.²¹⁸ Due to spatial limitations, the thesis considers reading associations in isolation from the other cultural activities, or other reading practices of their members: close studies of individual readers would be more suited to providing a holistic account of the place of associations in the lives of their members. It is difficult to determine whether the reading association practice examined here was a particular, public form of reading, or an expression

²¹⁶ Newton (1814); BOD, G. Pamph. 540 (1) *A catalogue of the books of the Bampton Reading Society* (1815); Duns (1789); Durham (1817); Exeter (1808); Fort William (1819); *A Catalogue of Books in the Gibraltar Garrison Library, Established in the Year 1793* (Gibraltar, 1821); Glasgow (1810); Haworth (1820); Kelso (1790); *A Library of Books for the Use of the Inhabitants of the Town and Neighbourhood of Macclesfield* (Macclesfield, n.d.); *Catalogue of the Paisley Theological Library Instituted Aug. 1808* (Paisley, 1825); Peterborough (1783); Salisbury (1819); Oxford (1809); *A Letter from the Chairman Explaining the Founding of the Library. With Rules*. (Reading, 1807); BOD, G. A. Warw b.1 (777) *Articles established for the Government of a Book Society in the City of Coventry*; Dalkeith (1798); Edinburgh (1823); HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library Laws; *Reading Room List of Books Purchased and Preserved* (Oxford, 1832); Paisley (1802); WCRO, CR304 Shipston-upon-Stour Reading Society Rules 1828; Dursley (1818); WYAS, HAS/B:11/6 Halifax Junior Book Society 1839.

²¹⁷ Towsey used a 'modern transcription', Towsey, *Reading*, 311.

²¹⁸ For some preliminary suggestions, see Morris, *Class*, 171; Money, *Experience and Identity*, 103-104.

of general (private) reading practices. This thesis suggests that reading associations embodied practices about which there was a broad consensus, and they appear to have functioned by building a communal superstructure upon otherwise normal, individual reading experiences. As there is a paucity of other sources which can be used to outline collective interpretative frameworks and shared practices, this study of reading associations is our best and most detailed indication of 'normal' reading practice, as well as displaying the specific constructions of reading as a publicly-accountable associational practice.

This thesis re-evaluates the principles which reading association members articulated, and their relationship to the cultural idioms which are often used to characterise this period. The first three chapters explore the intellectual history of the middling-sort readership of this period. Chapter one - 'The Reading Material of Reading Associations' analyses the popular canon as displayed in reading associations, showing the eclecticism as well as the serious scholarliness of contemporary literary culture. Chapter two - 'The Reading Practices of Reading Associations' considers how reading practices were shaped by the structures of reading associations, embedding individuals' reading practice in the avowed principles of their reading communities. Chapter three - 'Representations and Values' uses broader print culture to show the contemporary visibility of reading associations, which instantiated the 'reading public'. It explores their characterisation of appropriate reading, and their construction of the virtuous, gentle(wo-)manly reader regardless of the exact social rank of their participants.

The middle section of this thesis considers how associational communities, and by extension the reading public, were formed and defined. Chapter four - 'Community and Conflict' examines how reading associations conceptualised their communities, arguing that they displayed prevalent middling-sort ideals of a social contract and the egalitarian rule of law. The reading public of these associations was a self-conscious entity, which regulated access and sought a collective identity as citizen-readers. Chapter five - 'Gender and Family in Associations' shows that this republic of readers was not a homosocial, 'public' sphere, but rather was accessible to women and families, and indeed afforded them many opportunities and rights which they did not have in broader society. The interrelationship of domestic and associational sociability was especially marked in reading associations, at least in part

because the various discourses about reading made it particularly accessible to women. In addition, the involvement of families and women in these local institutions indicates the vibrant 'parochial sphere' of culture, which afforded opportunities and agency to those who were disenfranchised at the higher and more abstract levels of culture.

Finally, this thesis examines reading associations in wider contexts, relating them to constructions of local and national identity. Chapter six - 'Associations in Local Context' considers the importance of the local environment to the self-conception and activities of reading associations, which articulated a philosophy of collective improvement as exemplars to their locality. Members' reading and knowledge were expected to translate into other forms of local improvement, of the physical town, manners, and posterity. Chapter seven - 'Associations and the Making of National Culture' focuses on reading associations as an ubiquitous, nationwide phenomenon, assessing their significance in creating a consciously national reading public. This thesis suggests that reading practices and associational activity united middling-sort readers across the island, and indeed enabled the growing visibility of Scottish intellectuals and novelists in British culture.

Chapter One

The Reading Material of Reading Associations

I. Introduction

This chapter will explore which books were acquired by reading associations, in order to illuminate wider reading vogues. Judging which texts were most popular and widespread in the eighteenth century is a difficult task. John Richetti explains that ‘the five male novelists of the mid-century that posterity seems to have decided were the best’ are Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, Smollett and Sterne, admitting the subjective basis on which our sense of the eighteenth-century canon is formed.¹ Publication data can be interpreted as indices of growing supply, presumably provoked by increased consumer demand. The number of new titles published per year increased from 1,744 to 6,801 between 1723 and 1793.² Within this proliferation of texts, genres such as maths, science and medicine were in the ascendant, while the proportion of literary works published remained constant at around 11% of total output, and religious works declined from 34% of all titles to 16%.³ Karen O’Brien suggests that the 1774 copyright decision led to renewed interest in older writers including Smollett, Defoe, Fielding, Sterne and Haywood, highlighting the structural factors which affected readers’ options.⁴ In contrast to this backwards-looking urge, John Brewer and Roy Porter

¹ J. Richetti, ‘Introduction’, in J. Richetti (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge, 1996), 3.

² M. F. Suarez, ‘Towards a Bibliometric Analysis of the Surviving Record, 1701-1800’, in M. F. Suarez, S. J. Michael and M. L. Turner (eds), *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain: Volume 5 1695-1830* (Cambridge, 2009), 37-65.

³ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

⁴ K. O’Brien, ‘Introduction’, in P. Garside and K. O’Brien (eds), *English and British Fiction, 1750-1820* (Oxford, 2015), xvii-xxx.

highlight the importance of novelty in eighteenth-century culture, suggesting that purchasing and consumption were led by a desire for fashion and freshness.⁵

This thesis contends that production statistics cannot tell the whole story of reading patterns in this period: as Jan Fergus argues, ‘canonicity is not produced by what the market makes available...but by what customers choose to purchase’.⁶ What, and why, did consumers select from amongst this new swathe of works? Vivienne Dunstan argues that booksellers’ records, as well as library catalogues and private reading records, show the growing popularity of ‘improvement publications’, and the decline of religious texts from 1750 to 1820.⁷ However, she recognises a persistence of religious books within household inventories, highlighting that different types of records reveal different aspects of historical engagement with texts.⁸ Mark Towsey’s analysis of 400 Scottish private libraries showed that Hume’s *History of England* was the most widely held book, and he further suggests that Reid, Beattie, Smith and Blair were widely read.⁹ These studies focus on Scottish readers and Scottish texts, but we have little equivalent research into the most popular texts for English readers.

How then should we measure and characterise what was ‘popular’ and most widely read in this period? This thesis uses reading associations as a way to gauge middling-sort literary interests and social practices. Reading associations were fundamentally a form of ‘clubbing together’: pooling money in order to acquire more books than each individual otherwise could. A collective decision was therefore required, about which books to spend their money on. Associations asked members to write down their suggestions in a proposals book, which were then voted on by the members at their monthly meeting.¹⁰ Proposers were

⁵ J. Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1997), 150; R. Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London, 2000), 426.

⁶ J. Fergus, *Provincial Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 2006), 76.

⁷ V. Dunstan, ‘Reading Habits in Scotland circa 1750-1820’, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2010, 81, 101, 123.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁹ M. R. M. Towsey, *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment: Books and Their Readers in Provincial Scotland, 1750-1820* (Leiden, 2010), 38, 54-55.

¹⁰ Proposals books in *Macclesfield* (1796), 36; *Huntingdon* (1793), 5; *Bristol* (1790), 7; *Dalkeith* (1798), 2; *Leeds* (1785), 95; *London* (1800); *Halifax* (1785); *Stamford* (1787); HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library Laws, 4; *Ayr* (1802), 5; *Paisley* (1802), 11; *Exeter* (1807), 14; *Oxford* (1809), 5; *Lincoln* (1814), 17; *Hull* (1822), xii; *Ludlow* (1823), 3; *Doncaster* (1829), 10; *Edinburgh* (1829), 9. All members vote in *York Book Society* (1797), 6; *Lewes* (1793), 4; HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library Laws, 5; CAC, WPR/59/1A Kendal Book Club Rules, 1; CAC, WPR/59/2 Sedburgh Book Club, 2; *Whitby* (1814), 5; LPL, MS 1694 Wye Book Club Papers, 2; *Tavistock* (1839), 63.

asked to include details about the books, or to cite reputable reviews, which acted as justifications for the purchase. In smaller book clubs, there was sometimes an expectation that a book's proposer would purchase it at the annual auction for half of its value, unless better offers were given.¹¹ This guaranteed that the club would recoup its money, but also gave proposers a longer-term financial responsibility for their book suggestions. In larger associations, acquisitions decisions were devolved to an elected monthly committee.¹² At the Hull Subscription Library, rumours circulated 'that the successive Committees have betrayed a want of judgement and of impartiality, in the choice of Books'.¹³ To avoid this, committees operated by 'comparing the different Reviews' of works to make 'a fair and accurate judgement'.¹⁴ The book selections of reading associations thus voiced the priorities of the associational community, and drew upon popular review journals for legitimation.

This chapter will consider which genres were pre-eminent within associational holdings over the period; whether key informative or imaginative texts were widespread across the spectrum of associations, or featured only in certain categories of association; and the modernity of texts that associations acquired.

II. Genre Preferences within Reading Associations

Historians' studies of eighteenth-century reading material are often, and understandably, focused on specific genres.¹⁵ Inevitably, this is justified by an assertion that

¹¹ *Dursley* (1818), 3.

¹² By committee at *Stamford* (1787), 10; *Halifax* (1786), 65; *Bristol* (1790), 6; *Dalkeith* (1798), 8; *Manchester* (1794), 78. Secretary ordered at *London* (1800), 4; *Leeds* (1785), 95; HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton, 3; *Whitby* (1814), 7; *Ludlow* (1823), 7-8.

¹³ I. Wilson, *A Letter to Daniel Sykes, Esq. A. M. Barrister at Law, Respecting the Proceedings at the Meeting of the Subscribers to the Hull Subscription Library, in January 1812* (Hull, 1812), 8-9.

¹⁴ Wilson, *Sykes*, 10-11.

¹⁵ I. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London, 1963); K. Shevelov, *Women and Print Culture: The Construction of Femininity in the Early Periodical* (London, 1989); D. R. Woolf, *Reading History in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2000); likewise in edited collections e.g. I. Rivers (ed.), *Books and their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England: New Essays* (London, 2001).

the genre under consideration is the most important, prominent or new category of analysis.¹⁶ While such work is vital in providing detail about the way different genres were used and enjoyed, it prevents an appreciation of the overall picture of literary culture. One way of achieving this holistic view is by studying the records of individual readers, which show the variety of genres they read, and the ways and locations in which they read them.¹⁷ However, the representativity of these individual studies is hard to gauge, as the surviving records are usually of exceptional characters. This chapter uses reading association acquisitions to show the variety of texts, forms and styles which collectivities of eighteenth-century readers juxtaposed in their rich reading interests.

The public and communal nature of associational acquisitions means that their order lists represent what people wanted to be seen to be reading, and they are thus an ideal source for establishing reading vogues. The associations' reading matter has usually been characterised as serious: William St Clair argued that reading societies read the 'non-fiction texts of the public sphere', including religion, classics, history, and enlightenment works,¹⁸ and that they were responsible for a 'boom in serious reading'.¹⁹ Keith Manley advocated the serious intentions of reading associations: he described subscription libraries as 'havens of learning and literature, providing knowledge rather than entertainment', and argued that book clubs aimed at self-education.²⁰ Polly Bull argued that 'men did not read novels in the societies'.²¹ David Allan clarified that whilst there were some fictional works, there was 'an invariable emphasis on more serious forms of literature'.²² Historiographically, pleasure is more likely to be considered in relation to the commercial circulating libraries, and the novels

¹⁶ Watt, *Novel*, 9; Shevelov, *Women*, 6; Woolf, *History*, 215.

¹⁷ S. Colclough, 'Readers and Reading Practices', in Garside and O'Brien, *Fiction*, 550-551; K. Loveman, *Samuel Pepys and his Books: Reading, Newsgathering, and Sociability, 1660-1703* (Oxford, 2015); K. Sharpe, *Reading Revolutions: The Politics of Reading in Early Modern England* (London, 2000); R. DeMaria, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading* (London, 1997).

¹⁸ W. St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge, 2004), 252-253.

¹⁹ St Clair, *Nation*, 258. See also J. Feather, *The Provincial Book Trade in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1985), 41-42.

²⁰ K. A. Manley, 'Jeremy Bentham has been Banned: Contention and Censorship in Private Subscription Libraries before 1825', *Library and Information History*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Sept., 2013), 170; K. A. Manley, 'The S.P.C.K. and English Book Clubs before 1720', *The Bodleian Library Record*, Vol. XIII, No. 3 (Oct., 1989), 231-244.

²¹ P. E. Bull, 'The Reading Lives of English Men and Women, 1695-1830', Unpublished PhD Thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London 2012, 135.

²² D. Allan, '"The Advantages of Literature": The Subscription Library in Georgian Britain', in A. Crawford (ed.), *The Meaning of the Library: A Cultural History* (Oxford, 2015), 115.

with which they were associated.²³ Yet one-quarter of the Macclesfield Subscription Library's books were narrative fiction, and 23% of the Forfar Subscription Library catalogue, and 19% of the Dundee Subscription Library catalogue, were novels.²⁴ To clarify this ambiguity about the reading matter and focus of associations, this chapter provides a new assessment of the holdings of English and Scottish reading associations.

A further reason for this analysis is that, within the historiography of reading associations, it has been presumed that the different organisational forms of societies were linked to different reading interests.²⁵ Brewer stated that subscription libraries specialised in non-fiction, whereas book clubs focused on political and religious pamphlets and ephemera, which epitomises a broader distinction between the civic ambition of the libraries and the 'evanescent' localism of clubs.²⁶ Paul Langford characterised book clubs as 'cheaper and less pretentious' than subscription libraries.²⁷ Allan suggested that key texts of the Scottish Enlightenment by Smith, Robertson and Hume, which characterised the holdings of libraries in provincial centres, were not to be found in small-town reading societies.²⁸ There is thus an apparent separation between the serious intellectual works found in subscription libraries, and the ephemeral, topical works of smaller reading clubs. This chapter will use a new selection of sources to consider whether genres, practices and reading aims varied between associational forms.

In order to consider the type of texts that associations made available to their readers, I have analysed the acquisitions or order lists of seven associations for the period indicated: the Wye Book Club (1765), the Ayr Library Society (1776-81), the Exeter Library Society (1777-1781), the Greenock Library (1798-1802), the Caledonian Book Club (1806-1815), the Eclectic Book Society (1812-1814), and the Dursley Reading Society

²³ Watt, *Novel*, 48; S. Colclough, *Consuming Texts: Readers and Reading Communities, 1695-1870* (Basingstoke, 2007), 92-95.

²⁴ D. Allan, 'Circulation', in Garside and O'Brien, *Fiction*, 61; Dunstan, 'Reading', 85.

²⁵ The proportion of novels within the stock of commercial circulating libraries varied from 90% to 5%, according to Feather, *Provincial Book Trade*, 41. Although circulating libraries are beyond the scope of this study, this statistical evidence suggests that traditional categorisations of institutions by their titles or structures obscures important variations in purpose and practice.

²⁶ Brewer, *Pleasures*, 180-181.

²⁷ P. Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727-1783* (Oxford, 1989), 95.

²⁸ D. Allan, 'Some Methods and Problems in the History of Reading: Georgian England and the Scottish Enlightenment', *Journal of the Historical Society*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2003), 96.

(1819-1832).²⁹ These associations provide a geographical and chronological spread across all seven decades of this thesis, as well as profiling different types of association.³⁰ Rather than using the printed catalogues of these associations, as historians usually do, I have tracked the records of their orders and acquisitions within given time periods.³¹ This shows their evolving collection (and will later allow me to analyse the age of texts when they purchased them), rather than using the catalogue as a snapshot or conclusive overview of library holdings which had accumulated over decades. The order lists (from Ayr, Exeter, Greenock and the Eclectic Book Society) also show what societies intended or desired to read, as occasionally they ordered things which were out of print or otherwise unobtainable. Societies often recorded their orders in language that only loosely resembled their titles: I used the English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC), Worldcat, the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB) and the British Fiction Database to identify the texts ordered, bar a small handful of illegible records in each sample.³²

I have divided all the identified texts within the samples into genres, which are intended to highlight key epistemological categories of writing in this period: literature; history and lives; non-fiction; religion and philosophy; travel; and periodicals. Rather than presuming certain attitudes towards different categories of literature, as Dunstan does by using a classification system of 'religious', 'entertainment' and 'improvement' reading, I have focused on the formalist differences between genres, as a more objective, albeit authorial, understanding of their themes and styles.³³ In order to categorise works into genres, I have taken into account the subject fields by which they have been categorised in the ESTC, as well as evaluations of the work provided within their authors' ODNB articles. I used the titles to help determine the primary focus of a work, for example using key 'travel' terminology like 'voyages' to help place a work which could otherwise fit in either historical or travel. The

²⁹ Derived from: LPL, MS 1695 Wye Book Club Papers. Accounts 1764-1776; ACL, 027.441 Air [sic passim] Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776-1830; DA, Z19/41/1 Exeter Library Society Minutes 1777-1789; WLA, WA1/1/1/1 Greenock Library Minute Book 1794-1815; BA, FZ/5/1/1-60 Caledonian Book Club Receipts; LMA, CLC/064/MS00988A The Eclectic Book Society Minute Book 1812-1820; BOD, MS. Top. Gloucestershire d. 1 Dursley Reading Society Purchases 1819-32.

³⁰ The Ayr, Exeter and Greenock libraries were subscription libraries, whereas the Wye, Caledonian, Eclectic and Dursley societies were book clubs.

³¹ For catalogue analysis, see P. Kaufman, *Borrowings from the Bristol Library, 1773-1784: A Unique Record of Reading Vogues* (Charlottesville, 1960); St Clair, *Nation*, 252.

³² The English Short Title Catalogue, <http://estc.bl.uk>; Worldcat, <https://www.worldcat.org>; Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <http://www.oxforddnb.com>; British Fiction Database 1800-1829, <http://www.british-fiction.cf.ac.uk>.

³³ Dunstan, 'Reading', 22.

outcome of this analysis is displayed in table 1.1, with the associations listed chronologically, and genres arranged in order of magnitude.

1.1 Percentage of Acquisitions, by Genre

Association	Sample Size	Literature	History and Lives	Non-Fiction	Periodicals	Religion and Philosophy	Travel
Wye Book Club (1765)	68	49	4	10	21	10	6
Ayr Library (1776-1781)	102	20	32	20	0	17	12
Exeter Library (1777-1781)	175	31	19	14	9	9	18
Greenock Library (1789-1802)	96	22	24	21	5	4	24
Caledonian Club (1806-1815)	84	11	11	6	39	21	12
Eclectic Society (1812-1814)	81	22	16	24	3	32	4
Dursley Reading Society (1819-1832)	369	31	24	7	23	1	14
Average		27	19	14	14	13	13

Figures given to 0 decimal places. Samples derived from sources listed in footnote 29.

‘Literature’ encompasses novels, belles lettres, poetry and drama, as an aesthetic category of knowledge deriving from literary texts. The production of such works, particularly novels, multiplied rapidly in this period: ‘from around 231 new titles in the 1750s to 667 in the 1810s’.³⁴ How does this production narrative relate to reading choices in associations? Both Allan and Manley argue that there was a greater proportion of fiction in the collections of early nineteenth-century associations.³⁵ St Clair argued that even in the early nineteenth century, imaginative literature was still rare within subscription library collections.³⁶ Yet Allan later suggests that St Clair's conclusion should be treated with scepticism.³⁷ My analysis makes it clear that literature was a consistently popular category in reading associations, across the decades. Associations in Wye, Ayr, Exeter and Greenock all purchased works of

³⁴ K. O'Brien, ‘Introduction’, in Garside and O'Brien, *Fiction*, xx.

³⁵ D. Allan, ‘The Scottish Enlightenment and the Readers of Late Georgian Lancaster: “Light in the North”’, *Northern History*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Sept., 2000), 278; K. A. Manley, *Books, Borrowers and Shareholders: Scottish Circulating and Subscription Libraries before 1825: A Survey and Listing* (Edinburgh, 2012), 90.

³⁶ St Clair, *Nation*, 254.

³⁷ D. Allan, *A Nation of Readers: The Lending Library in Georgian England* (London, 2008), 106.

fiction alongside belles lettres, long before the turn of the century. The stereotype of 'serious' reading associations fails to acknowledge the pre-eminence of literary works, whether belles lettres, poetry or fiction. This reading material was just as important to reading associations as the edifying 'knowledge' texts of history or non-fiction, and was the most prominent category across this sample. Furthermore, this is due to a continuous interest in literature, the Caledonian Book Club excepted, rather than being skewed by a preference in the early nineteenth century.

'History' is often argued to have been a strong favourite across this period. Towsey, in his analysis of Scottish reading associations, argued that polite historiography was the 'preeminent genre', and drew the same findings from private library catalogues.³⁸ Allan likewise suggested that history was a 'core genre' because it bridged entertainment and instruction.³⁹ History also appealed to a broad constituency of readers, for women were encouraged to read it for moral improvement, whereas men could read it for knowledge and practical understanding.⁴⁰ For this reason, I have included memoirs and lives within the category of history, for they incorporate the narrative and didactic approach to past events which characterised history writing in this period.

Overall, history was the second most prominent category within the associational collections in this sample. Following O'Brien's argument that acquiring history texts was 'to enter into that world of political seriousness', these acquisitions show that even smaller book clubs were part of this intellectual culture.⁴¹ It seems clear that the Caledonian and Eclectic clubs' purchases were constrained by their small club size, limited finances, and circulating model, which dissuaded them from the purchase of expensive, multi-volume history texts. Yet the Dursley Reading Society contradicts this impression, exceeding some subscription libraries' percentage of history texts. Organisational structure did not necessarily dictate a society's level of civic engagement or 'serious' reading.

³⁸ Towsey, *Reading*, 66.

³⁹ Allan, *Nation*, 101. See also D. Allan, 'Provincial Readers and Book Culture in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Perth Library, 1784-c.1800', *The Library*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (2002), 378.

⁴⁰ J. Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (Cambridge, 1999), 50.

⁴¹ K. O'Brien, 'The History Market in Eighteenth-Century England', in Rivers, *Books*, 105.

'Non-fiction', meaning scientific texts, as well as other factual, reference or socio-political works, is considered to have blossomed with the Victorian craze for information.⁴² The presence of non-fiction works is variable across this sample, and being such a broad category, this is perhaps unsurprising. Furthermore, some associations curtailed or even banned the acquisition of technical or professional works.⁴³ This is difficult to reconcile with Becky Bowd's argument that reading associations contributed to a culture of specialist expertise and professional knowledge.⁴⁴ Instead, the reading community was conceived as (intellectually) inclusive and general, rendering technical texts undesirable, and keeping non-fiction works a low proportion of associational holdings.

'Religion and philosophy' has been argued to be of declining popularity in this period.⁴⁵ Some libraries did not possess religious titles at all;⁴⁶ and religious works, when mentioned in reading records, seem to have been treated as a separate type of reading.⁴⁷ Conversely, clergymen have been portrayed as central to the social makeup of book clubs, and dissenting influence has been linked to the success of subscription libraries in the Midlands.⁴⁸ The place of religious texts within reading associations is therefore unclear. In this sample, whilst religious material was available, it did not define or dominate associational collections. Interestingly, it is two book clubs, the Caledonian and the Eclectic, which bought the most religious material. The Eclectic Book Society's interest in religion stemmed from their eponymous affiliation to *The Eclectic Review*, a non-denominational periodical which commenced in 1805. In one sample year, when the Eclectic Society acquired 31 books which

⁴² A. Rauch, *Useful Knowledge: The Victorians, Morality, and the March of Intellect* (London, 2001).

⁴³ Prohibitions in *Paisley* (1802), 8; *Dursley* (1818); WCRO, CR304 Shipston-upon-Stour Reading Society; ACL, 027.441 Air Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776-1830, 111; *Doncaster* (1829), 11. BMC, AA/DC/180/1 Kilmarnock Public Library Minutes 1797-1823, 10 stated a preference for books that were useful to the members in general, rather than particular professions. At Montrose Library, 'only a small part to be devoted to professional books in Medicine, Commerce, Law or Theology', *The Gentleman's Magazine: and, Historical Chronicle*, Vol. 55, Part II (London, 1785), 536. *Macclesfield* (1796), 36 banned books of law, divinity and physic. On book prohibitions, see pages 148-149.

⁴⁴ R. Bowd, 'Useful Knowledge or Polite Learning? A Reappraisal of Approaches to Subscription Library History', *Library and Information History*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Sept., 2013), 182-195.

⁴⁵ J. Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge, 2001), 88; Dunstan, 'Reading', 123 shows a decline in religious borrowings through the century, but she later suggests a 'persistence of religious book ownership', 161.

⁴⁶ M. R. M. Towsey, 'First Steps in Associational Reading: Book Use and Sociability at the Wigtown Subscription Library, 1795-9', *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, Vol. 103, No. 4 (Dec., 2009), 455-495.

⁴⁷ Colclough, *Consuming Texts*.

⁴⁸ Allan, *Nation*, 38; T. Kelly, *Early Public Libraries: A History of Public Libraries in Great Britain before 1850* (London, 1966), 136.

were less than a year old, 74% had either been reviewed or listed in *The Eclectic Review*.⁴⁹ Similarly, the Caledonian Club subscribed to *The Christian Instructor*. They purchased several biblical commentaries as well as works by Paley, Doddridge and Dodd. Religious works were certainly not excluded from associational practice in the early nineteenth-century; indeed, they benefited from accompanying periodical works which revitalised their public appeal.

'Travel literature' also includes geographical texts, and is highlighted because of the contemporary importance of expanding geographical knowledge through exploration and scientific innovation.⁵⁰ Over 100 collections of voyages and travels were published between 1660 and 1800, and *The Monthly Review* asserted they were the second 'most fashionable kind of reading' in 1805.⁵¹ It has been suggested that travel books composed 12% of library holdings in the eighteenth century, which is broadly consistent with the average from my sample.⁵² Whilst travel texts demonstrate an interest in place and identity, their narrative structure and (occasional) fantastical embellishment meant they could be read as escapist fiction.⁵³ Similarly, history and, in particular, lives took a narrative form, meaning the easy separation of 'informative' and 'imaginative' texts cannot be sustained.⁵⁴

Within these records, periodicals are probably under-represented. Societies may have had a standing agreement to subscribe to review journals or magazines, so they do not recur regularly in the order lists examined here. The exceptions are the Caledonian Club records, which are booksellers' receipts and so include each periodical issue acquired, the Dursley Reading Society records, which include the selling-off of periodicals at the end of the year, and the Wye Book Club, which included periodicals in its annual book-list. Nonetheless, at the Dursley and Wye clubs the periodicals still constituted less than one-quarter of the

⁴⁹ LMA, CLC/064/MS00988A The Eclectic Book Society Minute Book 1812-1820; *The Eclectic Review*, from January to June 1813 Inclusive, Vol. IX (London, 1813); *The Eclectic Review*, from July to December 1813 Inclusive, Vol. X (London, 1813).

⁵⁰ See C. W. J. Withers, *Placing the Enlightenment: Thinking Geographically about the Age of Reason* (London, 2007), 1-16.

⁵¹ P. G. Adams, *Travelers and Travel Liars, 1660-1800* (New York, 1962), 88; *Monthly Review* quoted in R. Jarvis, *Romantic Readers and Transatlantic Travel: Expeditions and Tours in North America, 1760-1840* (Farnham, 2012), 19.

⁵² S. Rogers, 'Enlarging the Prospects of Happiness: Travel Reading and Travel Writing', in Suarez et al., *Cambridge History*, 790.

⁵³ Pearson, *Women's Reading*, 55.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 49.

total acquisitions. This supports the contention that periodicals formed a guide or supplement to contemporary literature, rather than supplanting it entirely.

Considering genre laterally, did reading associations focus on one type of text or spread their acquisitions across a variety of genres? The Greenock Library was most evenly distributed, with four categories each constituting around 20% of acquisitions. Other societies were not as balanced: the most dominant genre was the Wye Book Club's stock of literature, amounting to 49% of their holdings. This was primarily due to a penchant for plays, of which they acquired 15. The other pre-eminent genres within associations were 32% history at Ayr, 32% and 31% literature at Dursley and Exeter respectively, and 32% religion at the Eclectic Society. Thus, reading associations did not devote their resources solely to one genre which dominated their collections. At most, a given genre would constitute around one-third of the societies' acquisitions. Usually, the societies' top three categories combined to make up 70% of their acquisitions. This was an eclectic and broad reading remit, which drew upon various sources of knowledge and forms of text. This mirrors Richard Sher's argument that Scottish enlightenment authors frequently contributed works to multiple genres.⁵⁵

There is, however, an indeterminate relationship between the books a society acquired, and what was actually read by each reader. Helpfully, the Dursley Reading Society records indicate who purchased each book at the annual auction.⁵⁶ The purchasing records of 20 sampled members show that, on average, they purchased works from four of the six genre categories examined in table 1.1. Thus, individual readers in reading associations seem to have read across the genres within the associational holdings, leading them to eventually purchase from multiple categories. This breadth and variety contradicts Richard Altick's assertion of a contemporary 'prejudice against random reading'.⁵⁷ Instead, reading association holdings confirm Engelsing's idea of the 'extensive' reading revolution, which was characterised by a rich and varied diet of reading materials.

The records of the Wye Book Club enable an analysis of borrowings, moving beyond what the community chose to acquire, to the preferences of individual associational

⁵⁵ R. B. Sher, *The Enlightenment & the Book: Scottish Authors and their Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Ireland and America* (London, 2006), 85.

⁵⁶ BOD, MS. Top. Gloucestershire d. 1 Dursley Reading Society Purchases 1819-32.

⁵⁷ R. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Chicago, 1957), 132.

members.⁵⁸ These records have not been consulted by other historians, and although some of the records are illegible due to the practice of crossing out book numbers once they had been returned, 265 borrowings for the year 1760 have been analysed. Amongst the 90 works purchased by the club in 1760, the most regularly borrowed texts were Goldsmith's *An Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning in Europe* (London, 1759); *A Dictionary of the Holy Bible* (London, 1759); and Regis' *A Discourse upon the Intermediate State* (London, 1751), each of which was borrowed nine times. The next most frequent borrowing was of Tunstall's *Academica: part the first, containing several discourses on the certainty, distinction and connection of natural and revealed religion* (London, 1759), which was taken out eight times.

The same book club purchased 77 books in 1775, and 102 borrowings were recorded.⁵⁹ Of these, the most frequently borrowed book was *The Correspondents* (London, 1775), an epistolary novel, which was borrowed five times. *A Sunday Ramble* (London, 1775), a description of scenes on a journey through London, was borrowed four times, as was Melmoth's *Liberal Opinions* (London, 1775). Evidently, between 1760 and 1775 preferences had shifted, with religious works being trumped by literary ones. In the records from January to August 1785, 95 loans were made from the collection of 56 titles.⁶⁰ The most frequently borrowed works were Yearsley's *Poems, on Several Occasions* (London, 1785) and Cowper's *The Task, a Poem, in Six Books* (London, 1785), with six loans each. The next most popular works were Garrick's *The Poetical Works of David Garrick* (London, 1785) and Hutton's *A Journey from Birmingham to London* (London, 1785), with five loans apiece. By the 1780s poetry was the most popular genre in this book club, demonstrating that readers' interests shifted from religious to literary texts.

The circulating records of the Barnard Castle Book Club show that in the period 1831-3, when the club had 17 members, some books were only circulated to one member.⁶¹ Presumably, the circulation of books was contingent upon circumstance, with absent members missing their place in the circulation list, but was also affect by demand, or lack thereof. The most-circulated book was *Campaigns and Cruises, in Venezuela and New*

⁵⁸ LPL, MS 1694 Wye Book Club Papers. Rules and Accounts 1755-1766, 14-17.

⁵⁹ LPL, MS 1699 Wye Book Club Papers. Accounts 1764-1784, 46-47.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 62-63.

⁶¹ DCRO, D/HH/10/2/2 Barnard Castle Book Club Circulation Book.

Grenada (London, 1831), reaching fourteen of the members. Four books were circulated to thirteen members: *The Military Sketch Book*, *The Comic Annual*, *The Letters of Horace Walpole*, and *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters and Sculptors*. These books show that religious works were not prevalent in reading associations by the end of this period, and instead indicate an interest in travel, lives and memoirs.

The records of these two book clubs provide a new perspective on borrowing trends, confirming a shift from religious to literary works, and a burgeoning interest in travel, letters and poetry. The favoured works within these book clubs parallel trends in subscription library borrowing patterns. Paul Kaufman's list of the ten most borrowed books from the Bristol Library from 1773-1784 includes voyages, histories and literary works, but no religious titles.⁶² Towsey's analysis of loans at the Wigtown Subscription Library from 1796-1799 concluded that Bell's *British Theatre* was the most popular work, followed by Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Henry's *History of Great Britain* and Fielding's *Works*.⁶³ Overall, he argues for a later-eighteenth century shift to polite genres of novels and histories. Likewise, Dunstan concludes that 28% of the borrowings at the Selkirk Subscription Library from 1799-1814 were of novels, 16% of history books and only 3% of divinity.⁶⁴ The research presented here suggests that the borrowing preferences of book clubs, as well as the genres of their acquisitions, renders them part of the same reading culture.

To return to the original question: were societies' organisational structures a reliable indicator of their literary interests? Genres like history, travel and literature were popular across the period and throughout the associations. The highest proportion of religious material was to be found in two book clubs, the Caledonian Book Club and the Eclectic Book Society. Yet the Dursley Reading Society had only 1% religious literature, so this seems to reflect the interests of each group rather than a taxonomic criterion. Furthermore, there was variation between contemporaneous, organisationally similar societies, showing that there was no single formula for knowledge, improvement or entertainment. In the Ayr and Exeter libraries in the 1770s, there was an almost exact reversal between their percentages of

⁶² Kaufman, *Borrowings*, 122.

⁶³ Towsey, 'First Steps', 484.

⁶⁴ Dunstan, 'Reading', 100.

literature and of history. Similarly, the Caledonian Club and the Eclectic Society exhibited different priorities despite having the same temporal backdrop: the Eclectic Society was focused on religious texts, whereas the Caledonian Club was dominated by periodicals. These variable interests and localised preferences thus warn against characterising the reading interests of 'book clubs' in contradistinction to 'subscription libraries': rather, this chapter argues, they were part of the same public literary culture.

III. Popular Texts: an Enlightenment Canon?

It has been suggested that this period saw the rise of a 'national tradition' of literature, made fashionable through critical reviews.⁶⁵ Reading 'proffered an admission ticket into the cultural magic circle', but this depended on reading the right texts in the appropriate way, by relying on the guidance of the critical industry.⁶⁶ The idea of a specific canon of texts emerging in this period ties in to a new conception of the author.⁶⁷ Yet St Clair argued that in the romantic period 'there is little evidence that readers cared much about the identity or gender of the writers of the novels they read'.⁶⁸ Adrian Green's research into the books owned by Betty Bowes suggested that authors were only mentioned in reference to their 'Works'; otherwise, the content of each text was emphasised by giving its title, and authorship was only discussed in relation to an entire corpus.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ C. Siskin, 'More is Different: Literary Change in the Mid and Late Eighteenth Century', in Richetti, *Cambridge History of English Literature*, 822; B. Maidment, 'Periodicals and Serial Publications, 1780-1830', in Suarez *et al.*, *Cambridge History*, 503-505; B. M. Benedict, 'Readers, Writers, Reviewers, and the Professionalization of Literature', in T. Keymer and J. Mee (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1740-1830* (Cambridge, 2004), 11.

⁶⁶ Porter, *Enlightenment*, 76.

⁶⁷ Brewer, *Pleasures*, 144; Sher, *Enlightenment*, 5.

⁶⁸ St Clair, *Nation*, 174.

⁶⁹ A. Green, "'A Clumsey Countrey Girl': The Material and Print Culture of Betty Bowes", in H. Berry and J. Gregory (eds), *Creating and Consuming Culture in North-East England, 1660-1830* (Aldershot, 2004), 78.

On the other hand, Towsey has argued from his analysis of private book catalogues in Scotland that readers saw authors as brand names, classifying their books together.⁷⁰ Within reading societies, authors are often recorded more accurately in order lists than titles, confirming Towsey's impression of the 'brand name' effect on private purchasers. In its first order list, the Ayr Library Society selected 'Bryant's Mythology' (actually entitled *A New System, or, An Analysis of Ancient Mythology*), 'Lockman's History of the Persecution' (in fact called *A History of the Cruel Sufferings of the Protestants and Others by Popish Persecutions in Various Countries*) and 'Floyer on Bathing' (*Enquiry into the Right Use and Abuses of the Hot, Cold, and Temperate Baths in England*).⁷¹ In one meeting in November 1777, the Exeter Library Society compiled a list of books to be ordered:

Montesquieus Works
Ossians Works
Shenstones Works
Churchills Poems
Barboulds Works Poems and Miscellanies
Thickness's Tour through part of France and Spain⁷²

Evidently, the only title which was properly recorded was the final travel volume; the other works comprise the entire oeuvre of a given author. In contrast to assertions of the anonymity of authors, therefore, it seems clear that it was the writer rather than the exact title of the text which was its most identifiable feature, in reading association members' minds.

To what extent did these popular 'brand names' form a stock of common works, a contemporary cultural 'bestseller' list, which was manifest in reading association holdings? Ina Ferris argues that 'the eclectic nature of clubs' lists' suggests 'there was little consensus over the "core" of polite reading matter'.⁷³ To test this assertion, thirty associational catalogues, ranging from 1779-1829, have been examined. This sample includes catalogues from eight Scottish institutions, and contains book clubs, reading societies, and subscription libraries, with collections of between 84 books (Stamford Subscription Library) and 1,819

⁷⁰ Towsey, *Reading*, 37.

⁷¹ ACL, 027.441 Air Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776-1830, 1-2.

⁷² DA, Z19/41/1 Exeter Library Society Minutes 1777-1789, 14.

⁷³ I. Ferris, *Book-Men, Book Clubs, and the Romantic Literary Sphere* (Basingstoke, 2015), 114.

books (Manchester Circulating Library).⁷⁴ These catalogues were examined for selected non-fiction texts, including Smith, Gibbon and Hume, in order to establish whether English and Scottish reading associations read ‘enlightenment books’.⁷⁵ Secondly, the catalogues were searched for selected literary and fictional works such as novels by Fielding, Smollett and Richardson, Cook’s *Voyages* as an exemplar of travel literature, and works by Boswell and Johnson. Given the chronological range of the associations considered, each book’s prevalence is presented as a proportion of the catalogues in which it could have featured, i.e. those after its publication date.

1.2 Selected Non-Fiction Works in Associational Catalogues

Title	Number of associations in which present	% of post-publication catalogues
Smith, <i>Wealth of Nations</i> (1776)	22	73
Gibbon, <i>The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire</i> (1776)	21	70
Hume, <i>History of England</i> (1754)	20	67
Beattie, <i>Essay on the Nature of Truth</i> (1770)	19	63
Burke, <i>A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas on the Sublime and Beautiful</i> (1757)	16	53
Kames, <i>Gentleman Farmer</i> (1776)	8	27

As table 1.2 shows, works which are included in our contemporary perception of the eighteenth-century ‘canon’, such as Smith, Gibbon and Hume, were prevalent in associational holdings across this period. Histories, as well as philosophical and economic

⁷⁴ *Macclesfield* (1779); *Peterborough* (1783); *Leeds* (1785); *Halifax* (1786); *Stamford* (1787); *Duns* (1789); DCRO, D/X/1355/1 Westgate Library; *Kelso* (1790); *Cornwall* (1792); *Manchester* (1794); *York Book Society* (1797); *Bristol* (1798); CAC, WPR/59/1A Kendal Book Club Rules; *Ayr* (1802); *Exeter* (1808); *Glasgow* (1810); *Tavistock* (1810); *Kilmarnock* (1811); *Newton* (1814); BA, FZ/5/1/1-60 Caledonian Book Club Receipts; BOD, G. Pamph. 540 (1) *A catalogue of the books of the Bampton Reading Society* (1815); *Lincoln* (1815); *Durham* (1817); *Salisbury* (1820); *Fort William* (1819); *Haworth* (1820); *Ludlow* (1823); *Kirkcudbright* (1824); *Evesham* (1825); *Doncaster* (1829).

⁷⁵ Towsey found that Hume’s *History* was present in 42 of 44 Scottish subscription library catalogues, Beattie’s *Truth* in 25; Kames’ *Gentleman Farmer* in 10; M. R. M. Towsey, “All Partners may be Enlightened and Improved by Reading Them”: the Distribution of Enlightenment Books in Scottish Subscription Library Catalogues, 1750-c.1820’, *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2008), 20-43.

works, were found throughout this sample. However, table 1.3 indicates that literary works were even more popular: Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* being the most ubiquitous title, found in over four-fifths of associational catalogues after its publication. Cook's *Voyages* were to be found in over half of the associations, showing that travel literature was an acceptable and indeed popular category. Novels, represented by the seminal works of Fielding and Smollett, performed strongly, showing they were by no means absent from reading associations. However, the low percentage of institutions holding Richardson's *Pamela* is surprising; perhaps such popular fiction was already owned by individuals and thus was not purchased for the institution.

1.3 Selected Literary Works in Associational Catalogues

Title	Number of associations in which present	% of post-publication catalogues
Boswell, <i>The Life of Samuel Johnson</i> (1791)	18	82
Johnson, <i>Lives of the Poets</i> (1779)	19	63
Cook's <i>Voyages</i> (1771-1781)	15	52
Fielding, <i>Tom Jones</i> (1749)	12	40
Chesterfield, <i>Letters to his Son</i> (1774)	11	37
Smollett, <i>Humphrey Clinker</i> (1748)	11	37
Richardson, <i>Pamela</i> (1769)	4	13

This analysis demonstrates that 'serious' enlightenment works were to be found in the 'evanescent' societies as well as the subscription libraries. Beattie's *Essay on the Nature of Truth* was to be found in the Peterborough Society for the Promotion of Friendship and Literature, the York Book Society and the Caledonian Book Club. Hume's *History* was owned by societies across the institutional spectrum, including the Westgate Library, the Exeter Library for Young Persons, and the Manchester, Macclesfield and Halifax Circulating Libraries. It is certainly not true that serious works of philosophy and history were restricted to the large and prosperous county town libraries. Conversely, fictional texts such as *Humphrey Clinker* were accessible in the Glasgow Public Library, and the Durham Subscription Library; *Tom Jones* could be read in the Stamford Subscription Library, the

Duns Subscription Library, and the Bristol Library Society. Entertainment was as much a feature of subscription libraries as instruction was.

IV. Modernity

The age of the texts which were acquired by reading associations has largely been ignored in the historiography, as it is generally presumed that libraries were 'an ideal way to keep abreast of the contemporary scene', through their provision of 'new books'.⁷⁶ This links to the broader characterisation of the innovative marketing techniques of the eighteenth-century book trade, which meant 'no educated or polite or fashionable reader could afford to be without the new works'.⁷⁷ Up-to-date texts were supposedly essential, with printers even post-dating their publications to maximise their topicality.⁷⁸ Practices such as advertising, and wider processes of commercialization, gave a new cultural premium to novelty.⁷⁹

Yet this 'modernity' assumption is beginning to be questioned.⁸⁰ St Clair suggested that enlightenment texts were mainly read by the next generation, rather than the contemporaries of the famous philosophers, but he does not support this with any statistical evidence.⁸¹ Allan casts doubt upon reading associations' 'burning zeal for the cause of literary modernity', and instead suggests a melding of old and new tastes.⁸² Dunstan noted that the historical works being read in the Gray Library were often several decades old,

⁷⁶ P. Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660-1770* (Oxford, 1989), 135; Brewer, *Pleasures*, 182. See also K. A. Manley, 'The London and Westminster Libraries, 1785-1823', *The Library*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1985), 138, in which he describes their collection as 'modern'.

⁷⁷ J. Raven, *Judging New Wealth: Popular Publishing and Responses to Commerce in England, 1750-1800* (Oxford, 1992), 45

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁷⁹ Van Horn Melton, *Rise*, 93-94; Porter, *Enlightenment*, 426.

⁸⁰ Since this chapter was written, S. Colclough, 'Readers and Reading Practices' in Garside and O'Brien, *Fiction*, 550-551 noted that the diary of William Upcott 'is a useful reminder that readers from this period didn't only consume recently authored texts', as he read works from 1753, 1764 and 1796 in January 1803.

⁸¹ St Clair, *Nation*, 253.

⁸² Allan, *Nation*, 229.

whereas the travels and voyages were recent publications.⁸³ However, the Gray Library was a free public library, established by charitable bequest; it is thus not a representative example of reading association practice.⁸⁴ The following analysis redresses the absence of research into the age of texts acquired by reading communities, and seeks to determine whether the teleological tale of the advance of mass consumer culture was manifest in the purchases of reading associations.

I have used the same selection of reading associations to look at change over time in the age of books purchased.⁸⁵ Rather than seeking to establish the format and edition of each work that the societies purchased, I have identified the first publication date of the title. I am interested to discover whether societies were purchasing new works, or ones which had been in circulation for a long time, showing whether a premium was put on the topicality of ideas and their textual expression, or whether older forms were still desired. Table 1.4 shows that across this period, reading associations predominantly read texts which had first been published within the last five years. The modal average age of books, which identifies the value which was most often recorded, was either one year or less, across this entire sample. This trend accelerated in the latter examples of the Eclectic Book Society and the Dursley Reading Society, with recent publications increasing from an eighteenth-century average of around 60% of acquisitions to 85%. This would support the impression that a commodified literary culture, with an ever-increasing number of new titles published annually, and a review culture which created centralised literary fashions, led to the urge to read modern, fresh publications. This is consistent with references to the age of texts made in associational rules. The rules of a book society in Kettering stated that 'the books to be procured are restricted to... [those] published during the last three years'.⁸⁶ In Ayr Library, books were

⁸³ V. S. Dunstan, 'Glimpses into a Town's Reading Habits in Enlightenment Scotland: Analysing the Borrowings of Gray Library, Haddington, 1732-1816', *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, Vol. 26 (2006), 42-59.

⁸⁴ Dunstan, 'Reading', 88-89.

⁸⁵ This uses the same sources as listed in footnote 29, page 55, with the exception of the Dursley Reading Society, for which I have used their cash book, MS. Top. Gloucestershire e. 4 as this shows the date of ordering. I have excluded periodicals because of the variable practices of recording them, which would distort the associational comparison. Additionally, it is the indirect cultural influence of periodicals on book-reading which is being measured, so it would be inappropriate to include these texts within the age statistics. Excluding periodicals and records which could not be matched to a publication, left sample sizes of 68 (Wye), 96 (Ayr), 168 (Exeter), 89 (Greenock), 48 (Caledonian), 76 (Eclectic), 158 (Dursley).

⁸⁶ BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 5 (78).

disposed of because they had been 'rendered useless by subsequent Publications upon the same subject'.⁸⁷

1.4 Percentage of Titles, in Age Bands

Age of Title (years)	Wye Book Club (1765)	Ayr Library (1776-1781)	Exeter Library (1777-1781)	Greenock Library (1789-1802)	Caledonian Club (1806-1815)	Eclectic Society (1812-1814)	Dursley Society (1818-1823)
0-5	64	58	54	56	40	76	85
6-10	11	5	10	19	6	3	5
11-15	9	4	7	2	17	3	3
16-20	0	5	10	8	4	3	2
21-25	5	4	4	1	6	1	1
26-30	0	5	7	5	2	0	1
31-50	5	6	6	6	8	3	2
51-100	5	6	2	2	17	5	1
101+	0	5	1	1	0	7	0
Modal Average	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
Mean Age	10.4	19.1	11.7	11.4	21.9	17.4	3.4
Maximum	89	199	180	145	98	249	61
Upper Quartile	10.5	22.5	18	10	31	4.25	2

Yet the mean average age of publications acquired by reading societies was always over 10 years, until the Dursley Reading Society in the 1820s. Whilst the acquisitions tended towards the modern, there were still a significant number of texts which were by no means new. All of the societies contained at least one, and often many, texts which were over 50 years old. This is consistent with the rhetoric of the Halifax Circulating Library, which claimed to sponsor 'not only the best Productions of modern Writers, but also the best Translations of valuable, antient Authors'.⁸⁸ Nonetheless, the purchase of old texts diminished in the latter associations, as analysis of the upper quartile shows. The upper quartile is the midpoint

⁸⁷ ACL, 027.441 Air Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776-1830, 50.

⁸⁸ WYAS, MISC:5/96C/79 Proposals for Establishing a Circulating Library in Halifax.

between the median value in a range and the highest data value. In terms of these records, if a society's books were placed in age order, from newest to oldest, it would be the value 75% of the way through that list. The upper quartile is markedly lower in the Eclectic and Dursley societies. This could be taken to indicate that clubs, which sold off their books at the end of the year, did not build up a collection of older works that were retained by subscription libraries. Yet the Caledonian Club had the highest upper quartile of all, at 31; and the Greenock Library and Wye Book Club had similar upper quartiles, at around 10 years. Rather than taxonomic difference, perhaps this indicates that the extent of associations' retrospective reading was beginning to decline in the nineteenth century: further research is needed to confirm this.

This pioneering analysis of the age of the works which associations acquired has challenged the assumption of the relentless modernity of eighteenth-century literary culture. Whilst they generally acquired works within five years of their first publication, the average age of books in a collection was sometimes as high as 21, and every association purchased a work which was over 50 years old. Certainly, these were not 'evanescent' or ephemeral reading materials, but a mixture of recent publications and some long-lasting texts.

V. Conclusion

This chapter has provided ample evidence that both book clubs and subscription libraries could access enlightenment texts, meaning that associations did not form an intellectual hierarchy. Associations' genre interests varied even within institutions of the same type, rendering the taxonomic separation between book clubs and subscription libraries meaningless. Furthermore, this new analysis of book club borrowings shows that these readers had similar genre preferences to library subscribers, meaning there is no need to treat clubs as a separate phenomena. Finally, the mean average age of the texts acquired by

subscription libraries in table 1.4 was 14 years old; that of the book clubs was 13. There was thus little distinction even in the topicality of the works they purchased. More generally, the prevalence of well-known enlightenment works and imaginative fiction across these associations demonstrates that the provinces were not divorced from high intellectual culture or fashionable leisure; the associations were part of a vibrant distribution network, which enabled readers from Ayrshire to Kent to participate in reading vogues.

Overall, a consistent theme is the declining purchase and borrowing of religious texts within associations. This is not necessarily to suggest that religious reading declined overall; rather, the low proportion of religious literature purchased by reading associations such as the Wye Book Club, the Exeter Library, the Greenock Library and the Dursley Reading Society suggest that such works were no longer consumed within these semi-public communities, which adopted an areligious, generalist stance. Religious works became the focus of private devotional routines rather than forming the common currency of these societies. This ties with analyses of readers, who seem to have considered their religious reading as a separate activity, and did not record it in the same way as their leisure or studious reading.⁸⁹ However, some communities seem to have consciously prioritised religious works, such as the Eclectic Book Society, with their explicit shared adherence to the doctrines of *The Eclectic Review*. Evidently, further research must be done to better understand the importance and contexts of religious reading for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers; however, this chapter has preliminarily suggested that religious works did not form the common reference point of associational discourse.

This chapter has examined the genres, canonicity and modernity of reading association texts in order to establish what constituted popular literary culture in this period. While associations consistently acquired recently-published texts, there was also a desire for older works, contradicting the reductive view of rampantly commercial culture. It has shown that associations acquired a range of genres, including 'serious' informative works of history and non-fiction, alongside imaginative ones. Indeed, some titles of imaginative literature were more popular and canonical within associations than works of history or philosophy. What is most important, however, is that associations provided a range across all sorts of genres.

⁸⁹ Loveman, *Pepys*, 43; S. Colclough, 'Procuring Books and Consuming Texts: The Reading Experience of a Sheffield Apprentice, 1798', *Book History*, Vol. 3 (2000), 29.

They were not specialised into narrow literary interests, but embraced various categories of publications. The purchasing records from the Dursley Reading Society auctions show that individual members purchased works from across the genres too. This 'generalist' purview will be further examined in chapter three, as part of the construction of gentlemanly knowledge which eschewed scholarly pedantry.

Here, the import of this range of genres is that it portrays reading associations as a portal to the wider spectrum of available literature. Kloek and Mijnhardt, in their study of eighteenth-century Middelburg in the Netherlands, suggest that 'reading societies fulfilled a crucial role in the literary socialization of the reading public'.⁹⁰ Using booksellers' records, they argue that private reading purchases focused on familiar genres, whereas societies' purchases were of new general reading.⁹¹ They thus suggest that reading societies provided support for readers who were intimidated by a range of new genres, allowing them to experiment with this new literature while minimising their financial outlay on 'riskier' texts. This model seems applicable to the reading associations under discussion in this chapter: they provided a wide range of literature, and encouraged extensive reading across genres. Their role in providing guidelines and legitimacy in the midst of this dynamic literary culture will be further explored in chapter two.

⁹⁰ J. J. Kloek and W. W. Mijnhardt, 'The Ability to Select. The Growth of the Reading Public and the Problem of Literary Socialization in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', in A. Rigney and D. Fokkema (eds), *Cultural Participation: Trends Since the Middle Ages* (Amsterdam, 1993), 59-60.

⁹¹ Ibid.

Chapter Two

The Reading Practices of Reading Associations

I. Introduction

This chapter will move beyond the books which associations acquired, to analyse the traces that remain of their reading practice. This research is premised on the idea that textual meaning is created not only through various layers of linguistic signification, but also by cultural practices and contexts.¹ Works have ‘no stable, universal, fixed meaning’, and their ‘reception invents, shifts about, distorts’.² Instead of focusing on the innate meaning of the texts, emphasis is placed on the interpretative strategies of the reader. Following reception theory, this chapter analyses reading ‘within the structure of society and literary culture’, but also emphasises the active role of readers as part of a reader-response approach.³ How did the reading association affect or inform reading practice, and to what extent did this encourage innovative forms of reading?

The most dramatic shift posited in the historiography of eighteenth-century reading is Rolf Engelsing’s theory of a reading revolution, from intensive reading of a few seminal texts, to extensive reading across a wide range of literature.⁴ However, historians have increasingly challenged this model of a binary shift from one reading mode to the other, instead suggesting the persistence of intensive forms of reading in the eighteenth century, as well as

¹ R. Appignanesi and C. Garratt, *Introducing Postmodernism* (Cambridge, 2007), 70-77.

² R. Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1994), ix-x.

³ K. Sharpe, *Reading Revolutions: The Politics of Reading in Early Modern England* (London, 2000), 35; see also S. Colclough, *Consuming Texts: Readers and Reading Communities, 1695-1870* (Basingstoke, 2007), 7.

⁴ R. Engelsing, *Der Bürger als Leser: Lesergeschichte in Deutschland 1500-1800* (Stuttgart, 1974).

the enjoyment of a wider range of texts.⁵ Stephen Colclough remarks that extensive reading was only possible for bourgeois readers, who were thus in the vanguard of new reading practices.⁶ By their interest in collecting literature in an expanding world of print, reading associations point towards extensive reading interests; but their holdings alone cannot explain how readers actually approached each individual text. What do we know of eighteenth-century reading practices?

Studies of individual readers have provided insights into the methods and mentalities which historical actors brought to their reading practice. For the seventeenth century, studies of Gabriel Harvey, Samuel Pepys and William Drake have established their 'goal-orientated' scholarly reading practices, with active note-taking and cross-referencing of works in commonplace books.⁷ Kate Loveman suggests that Pepys was 'more cautious about investing in books he associated with diversion', prioritising information over entertainment.⁸ Eighteenth-century case studies suggest that reading continued to be configured as an active, purposeful pursuit: John Brewer argues that Anna Larpent read fiction in pursuit of moral edification, and Colclough presents Gertrude Savile's 'underlying assumption' that texts should have an 'instructive dimension'.⁹ However, the nature of these records of exceptional readers perhaps predisposes them to portray purposeful reading, as the very act of record-keeping implies a studious mode.

The details of individual reading practices have occasionally been revealed by readers' records. Transcribing or commonplacing sections from books remained common, and empowered readers by allowing them to control the extracts' meaning by their placement in conjunction with other extracts.¹⁰ Readers were advised not to skim texts, but rather were

⁵ P. E. Bull, 'The Reading Lives of English Men and Women, 1695-1830', Unpublished PhD Thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London 2012; J. Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1997), 169; D. Allan, *A Nation of Readers: The Lending Library in Georgian England* (London, 2008), 227; M. R. M. Towsey, *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment: Books and Their Readers in Provincial Scotland, 1750-1820* (Leiden, 2010), 300-301.

⁶ Colclough, *Consuming Texts*, 116.

⁷ L. Jardine and A. Grafton, "'Studied for Action": How Gabriel Harvey Read his Livy', *Past and Present*, Vol. 129. No. 1 (Nov., 1990), 30-78; K. Loveman, *Samuel Pepys and his Books: Reading, Newsgathering, and Sociability, 1660-1703* (Oxford, 2015), 77; Sharpe, *Reading Revolutions*, 177, 258.

⁸ Loveman, *Pepys*, 49.

⁹ J. Brewer, 'Reconstructing the Reader: Prescriptions, Texts and Strategies in Anna Larpent's Reading', in J. Raven, H. Small and N. Tadmor (eds), *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England* (Cambridge, 1996), 226-246; Colclough, *Consuming Texts*, 61-62.

¹⁰ S. Colclough, "'Do you not know the quotation?": Reading Anne Lister, Anne Lister Reading', in J. Beynon and C. Gonda (eds), *Lesbian Dames: Sapphism in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Farnham, 2010), 159-172; Colclough, *Consuming Texts*, 35.

to have a proper understanding of the work as a whole.¹¹ However, there is evidence of readers consuming texts only partially, or out of sequence: there was inevitably slippage between prescription and practice.¹² Books also continued to be read aloud, amongst families and friends in the home, or given as gifts to solidify relationships: the oral and sociable aspect of texts thus remained important.¹³

Over the course of the eighteenth century, the development of novels and the proliferation of circulating libraries prompted a moral panic about cultural decline.¹⁴ How accurate was this contemporary criticism of a shift in reading mentalities, from 'instructive' to purely recreational aims? Robert DeMaria posits a changing cultural emphasis from studious to 'curious' reading, defined as an absorbed mode, principally associated with novels.¹⁵ Daniel Woolf argues that history books, previously read for instruction, developed additional associations with leisure and recreational reading in the eighteenth century.¹⁶ Polly Bull suggests the 'marriage of amusement and instruction in the consumption of print', in the diaries of middling-sort and gentry readers across the long eighteenth century.¹⁷ Rather than analysing print materials by presuming their nature as 'instructive' or 'entertaining' works, this chapter will investigate the associations' guidelines for reading practice, seeking to illuminate their approach to reading, and the broader culture in which it was situated. What can reading associations tell us of the methods and aims of this semi-public reading practice?

Reading associations are an intermediate stage between one individual's private reading of a text, and the public performance of a text by reading it aloud amongst friends. The structures which they instituted, such as loan periods, constituted a collective agreement about appropriate reading methods. The effect of reading association structures on members' reading experiences has not been examined in the historiography, beyond an analysis of the predominant genres which they offered to readers. This chapter will consider how reading association structures affected and conditioned the reading experiences of their

¹¹ Bull, 'Reading Lives', 118.

¹² S. Colclough, 'Procuring Books and Consuming Texts: The Reading Experience of a Sheffield Apprentice, 1798', *Book History*, Vol. 3 (2000), 21-44; Colclough, *Consuming Texts*, 106.

¹³ N. Tadmor, '"In the even my wife read to me": Women, Reading and Household Life in the Eighteenth Century', in Raven *et al.*, *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, 162-174; Colclough, '"Do you not know?"', 161.

¹⁴ P. Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727-1783* (Oxford, 1989), 95.

¹⁵ R. DeMaria, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading* (London, 1997), 6, 18.

¹⁶ D. R. Woolf, *Reading History in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2000), 9, 123, 316-317.

¹⁷ Bull, 'Reading Lives', 119.

members, in order to determine whether they instituted any significant changes to reading culture. Furthermore, it will analyse structures in tandem with case studies of readers, seeking to illuminate not only the theory, but the individualised practice of reading within associations.

The surviving records of associational rules and minutes focus on their routines of acquiring and circulating books, rather than indicating any discussion or analysis of books.¹⁸ Reading associations did not actually read books in one another's company, and did not timetable or foreground discussions about the associations' books. Of course, such conversations may have occurred, in informal fashions which these records do not capture; but extant templates for meetings demonstrate that this was not conceived as their primary or official purpose.¹⁹ It was fundamentally expected that members would read the books in their own homes. Even some associations which had premises suggested that books should not be read there: the Halifax Circulating Library rules stated that 'the Subscribers shall not read the Books in the Library Room, without leave from the Librarian, upon extraordinary occasions'.²⁰ At the Leeds Circulating Library, members were to recompense the librarian for her 'extra trouble' if they read on the premises.²¹ However, magazines and reviews were more likely to be confined to library rooms (if they had any) for at least the first month, in order to maximise their readership whilst they were new: it is such topical literature that was most likely to be consumed in this public setting, and potentially discussed.²²

On the whole, reading was still conducted in traditional, domestic environments, and was certainly not a 'sociable' or shared experience between the members of the reading association. Despite this lack of communal reading, aspects of individuals' reading were conditioned by collective associational practices. This chapter will consider physical books, orderly reading practices, borrowing periods and periodical formats, to assess what kind of

¹⁸ This chapter principally draws upon: CAC, WPR/59/2 Sedbergh Book Club; *London* (1785); *Leeds* (1785); *Halifax* (1786); *Stamford* (1787); BOD, G. A. Warw b.1 (777) *Articles established for the Government of a Book Society in the City of Coventry*; *Kelso* (1790); HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library Laws; *Huntingdon* (1793); *Manchester* (1794), HL, MS 5/27 Wigtown Subscription Library; *Macclesfield* (1796); *York Book Society* (1797); *Bristol* (1798); *Dalkeith* (1798); *London* (1800); CAC, WPR/59/1A Kendal Book Club Rules; *Ayr* (1802); *Paisley* (1802); *Exeter* (1808); *Oxford* (1809); *Glasgow* (1810); *Kilmarnock* (1811); *Whitby* (1814); *Newton* (1814); *Lincoln* (1814); *Edgbaston* (1816); *Dursley* (1818); *Hull* (1822); *Edinburgh* (1823); *Ludlow* (1823); *Doncaster* (1829); BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 5 (78); BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 3 (44).

¹⁹ For meeting templates, see *Huntingdon* (1793), 7; *Paisley* (1802), 15-16.

²⁰ *Halifax* (1786), 65.

²¹ *Leeds* (1785), 103.

²² *Kelso* (1790), 71; *Stamford* (1787), 10; *Ludlow* (1823), 12; *Tavistock* (1839), 63.

reading was encouraged by the associations. Ultimately, reading remained a personal encounter with the text, but the reading association was an important new filter from which readers garnered values, approaches and expectations.

II. Associational Structures: The Material Text

The physical book which an association member borrowed was marked with the authority of the reading association. 21 of 34 associations noted the loan period on the inside cover of their books, reinforcing the time limitations on the reading experience.²³ Many libraries pasted a bookplate or wrote their name on to the flyleaf of a library book, which asserted their ownership.²⁴ The authority of the association was thus literally stamped on the book, reminding the reader of their temporary and conditional access to the text. The reading associations had rules about the treatment of texts, which were often written into the books themselves. The Brunswick Mill Library label requested that 'this Book may be kept as clean as possible', and the label of the Manchester Circulating Library noted that turning down leaves 'will be deemed a Damage'.²⁵ The preface of the Manchester Library's catalogue reminded the reader of their duties, including 'preserving the covers on books, keeping the books clean...[and] careful perusal of maps'.²⁶ Those who wrote notes onto a text were forced to purchase a new one, and such activities were denounced as 'transgressing' the rules.²⁷ Robert DeMaria notes that Samuel Johnson was attentive to the physical characteristics and beauty of books, particularly works for reference and study, whereas he

²³ WYAS, MISC:5/96C/79 Proposals for Establishing a Circulating Library in Halifax, 6; *Leeds* (1785), 97; *Halifax* (1786), 65; *Stamford* (1787), 7; HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library Laws, 3; *Manchester* (1794), 76; *Macclesfield* (1796), 39; *York Book Society* (1797), 6; *Bristol* (1798), vii; *Dalkeith* (1798), 9; *London* (1800), 4; *Paisley* (1802), 12; *Oxford* (1809), 6; *Kilmarnock* (1811), 5; *Whitby* (1814), 6; *Lincoln* (1814), 8; *Hull* (1822), vii; *Ludlow* (1823), 11; *Edinburgh* (1823), 6; *Doncaster* (1829), 11; BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 5 (78), 2.

²⁴ *Whitby* (1814), 5. See also *Kelso* (1790), 72, *Dalkeith* (1798), 9; *Paisley* (1802), 9; *Ludlow* (1823), 12.

²⁵ BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 5 (30); Circulating Libraries Box 5 (36).

²⁶ *Manchester* (1794), 3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

tore and bent texts which were linked with 'perusal', 'mere' and 'curious reading'.²⁸ Reading associations' insistence on the good treatment of their texts was a practical attempt to preserve a shared resource, but also encouraged a reverential, higher-order reading encounter. They also enlisted the community to police these offences: the Bury Library Room's label requested that members report any misuse of books.²⁹

Nonetheless, in some associations subscribers did mark the texts and impinge on the reading experience of other members, which was evocatively described as acts of 'defacing or disfiguring' by the Huntingdon Book Club.³⁰ Coleridge apologised after annotating a book belonging to the Stowey Book Club, which he had thought was someone's private property.³¹ He was concerned because 'the words were not cautiously chosen'; evidently, his annotations were not meant for public consumption.³² On another occasion, Coleridge wrote to a correspondent that 'in awe of the precisians of the Book Society' he had written some comments about a novel 'on separate paper', suggesting that this was not his usual practice.³³ Reading a communal book was thus a formal experience, subject to rules, but also a second-hand experience, in which physical remainders could intrude into readers' encounters with the text. Markings could irritate or enlighten a subsequent reader. The guaranteed effect, however, was that the reader recognised their encounter with the text was only temporary, was informed and impacted by other readers, and was restricted by its shared nature.³⁴ Some societies wrote a register of members into library books, in order that members could sign when they had received and dispatched it.³⁵ The wider reading community was thus a tangible presence in associational reading encounters, which strengthened readers' sense of being part of a broader reading public.

Damage was a perennial fear of reading association committees, as it depreciated the value of their book-stock. It was recognised that reading was a physical encounter with

²⁸ DeMaria, *Samuel Johnson*, 27, 35.

²⁹ BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 6 (72).

³⁰ *Huntingdon* (1793), 6.

³¹ H. Sandford, *Thomas Poole and his Friends*, 2 Vols (London, 1888), ii. 201.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 6 Vols (Oxford, 2000), vi. 989.

³⁴ Towsey notes that book owners often removed marginalia left by previous owners: Towsey, *Reading*, 181.

³⁵ BOD, G. A. Warw b.1 (777) *Articles established for the Government of a Book Society in the City of Coventry*; *York Book Society* (1797), 8; *London* (1800), 4; *Edgbaston* (1816), 2; BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 5 (78), 2. Examples of printed registers in BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 2 (26); Circulating Libraries Box 7 (67); Circulating Libraries Box 7 (77).

the text, and that some damage and wear would inevitably occur.³⁶ The Scottish associations seem to have been particularly efficient at monitoring the state of their books. At the Wigtown Subscription Library, the books were regularly examined and their good condition was reported to the annual general meetings.³⁷ The Kilmarnock Library frequently inspected its books for damage. They acknowledged that 'no injury had been sustained by any, but such as most unavoidably arise from perusal', but later complained that they naturally suffered from 'the considerable handling they must now undergo by so many readers'.³⁸ In 1799, it was discovered that the maps in Edwards' *History of the West Indies* were torn, so it was decided that they should be cut out and pasted upon canvas.³⁹ In 1828, the library investigated 'the case of Dr Stevenson's losing the Plates out of Buckingham's Travels'.⁴⁰ The readers were therefore accountable to the association for their physical encounter with the text. This reinforces the argument that associational reading was more formal and constricted than reading one's own copy of a text.

The Westgate Library in Durham kept a strict record of the damage caused to each of their library books. Out of 175 books for which entries were made, 81 incurred damage; a fairly high proportion.⁴¹ The types of damage recorded included drops of grease, dirt, blots, ink, writing, torn leaves, and blood, making the reading encounter seem like a messy, rough and even pugnacious experience. The ink blots suggest that readers were making notes whilst reading, following a studious approach to the texts. Yet torn leaves, dirt and blood show a careless handling of the books, which seem to have been read in chaotic environments rather than in the scholarly isolation of a neat library. Thus, the physical condition of the books would have been a clear reminder to any subsequent reader that they had passed through many hands and were a communal resource, which readers had poured and even bled over.

³⁶ WCRO, CR304 Shipston-upon-Stour Reading Society Rules 1828; ACL, 027.441 Air Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776-1830, 12.

³⁷ HL, MS 5/27 Wigtown Subscription Library, 5, 18, 32.

³⁸ BMC, AA/DC/180/1 Kilmarnock Public Library Minutes 1797-1823, 54, 112.

³⁹ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁰ BMC, AA/DC/180/1/2 Kilmarnock Public Library Minutes 1823-74, 32.

⁴¹ DCRO, D/X/1355/1 Westgate Library, 238-256.

III. Associational Structures: Orderly Reading

The reading association catalogue was an important way to impose order on the communal reading process. At Hull Subscription Library, a 'Methodical Catalogue of all Tracts and Pamphlets' was created, which sought to amount to a 'scientific synopsis of their contents'.⁴² This was said to improve ease of access to the texts, but clearly also embodied bibliographic and indeed enlightenment taxonomies of knowledge.⁴³ Catalogues were also essential tools for specifying which book members wished to withdraw (and were used in the same way in circulating libraries): at the Huntingdon Book Club a member was 'supposed to have his Catalogue with him' at meetings, to announce 'the Numbers of the Books he wishes to have'.⁴⁴

Orderly reading was encouraged by reading associations, particularly in relation to multi-volume works. The Whitby Subscription Library's rules supported this structured reading: anyone taking out an odd book from a set was forced to return it if someone had read the preceding volume and wished to progress chronologically to the next.⁴⁵ At the Norwich Public Library, after taking the first volume in a set the rest were then delivered 'in regular order'.⁴⁶ At the York Book Society, members who requested a volume of a 'new publication which consists of one continued narration, though comprehended in different volumes' was 'entitled to read them in succession', and the same language was used at the Leeds Circulating Library.⁴⁷ The recurrent idea of a 'set' or collection of volumes in reading association rules shows that they did not view books in isolation, but rather as interrelated and indeed successive additions to a writer's oeuvre. In Wigtown Subscription Library, they enquired about the expense of 'completing the Library's series of the London Annual Register', and also wished 'to complete Malthus on population, one volume of which has

⁴² HHC, UDSL/13 Hull Subscription Library, 26-27.

⁴³ R. Yeo, *Encyclopaedic Visions: Scientific Dictionaries and Enlightenment Culture* (Cambridge, 2001), xi-xiv, 25-26.

⁴⁴ *Huntingdon* (1793), 5. On the usage of catalogues in commercial circulating libraries, see C. Ford, 'Reading Associations in the Late Eighteenth Century: Practices, People and Presentation', Unpublished Master's Dissertation, University of Oxford, 2013, 22-24.

⁴⁵ *Whitby* (1814), 2.

⁴⁶ *A Catalogue of the Books belonging to the Public Library and to the City Library of Norwich* (Norwich, 1825), xiii.

⁴⁷ *York Book Society* (1797), 10; *Leeds* (1785), 103.

been lost'.⁴⁸ 24 of 34 associations considered here stipulated that if someone damaged or lost one book from a set, they had to replace the entire collection.⁴⁹

The orderly reading patterns encouraged by associational structures seem to have been at odds with private reading practices. Colclough noted that Joseph Hunter often read multi-volume works out of sequence, calling it a 'long and fragmented' reading process.⁵⁰ Jan Fergus suggested that such 'desultory' reading patterns were in line with contemporary publication and narrative practices which often left texts incomplete, and thus 'eighteenth century readers might have been comfortable with a less linear approach'.⁵¹ How successful was reading association legislation in preventing this desultory reading?

Thomas Egglestone was a committed user of the Westgate Library from 1788-1814, aside from in a hiatus from 1791-5. His 216 borrowings across these 18 years provide one of the most comprehensive and ongoing accounts of this library's usage by its members, and have the advantage of beginning at the inception of the library in 1788, as he was its sixth member.⁵² He is likely to be the Thomas Eggleston[e] recorded as Deputy Prothonotary of the Durham Court of Pleas, and was also recorded as a subscriber to Mackenzie's *History of Newcastle*.⁵³ Overall, his choices reflect the library's holdings, being 58% religious works, followed by 28% non-fiction, with small proportions of fiction, periodical literature, and history.⁵⁴ A case study of his borrowings indicates the ways in which the reading society influenced his reading experience.

Most noticeably, Egglestone seems to have used the catalogue to guide his reading, often embarking on long runs of consecutively numbered books. In the first 17 months of the library, he read catalogue numbers three through to nineteen, listed as Wesley's works. This

⁴⁸ HL, MS 5/27 Wigtown Subscription Library, 49.

⁴⁹ *Leeds* (1785), 101; *London* (1785), 2; *Halifax* (1786), 67; *Stamford* (1787), 12; HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library Laws, 4; *Manchester* (1794), 76; *Macclesfield* (1796), 36; HL, MS 5/27 Wigtown Subscription Library, 4; *York Book Society* (1797), 9; *Bristol* (1798), vii; *Dalkeith* (1798), 11; *Ayr* (1802), 6; *Paisley* (1802), 14; *Exeter* (1808), 13; *Oxford* (1809), 7; *Glasgow* (1810), xv; *Kilmarnock* (1811), 5; *Newton* (1814), 4; *Lincoln* (1814), 9; *Dursley* (1818), 5; *Hull* (1822), xiv; *Ludlow* (1823), 5; *Edinburgh* (1823), 10; *Doncaster* (1829), 12.

⁵⁰ Colclough, *Consuming Texts*, 106.

⁵¹ J. Fergus, *Provincial Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 2006), 113.

⁵² DCRO, D/X/1355/1 Westgate Library, 16-70, 239.

⁵³ G. B. Mansel, *The Practice upon Writ of Trial, for Debts Not Exceeding £20: Before the Sheriff, under 3 & 4 W.4, C. 42; Writ of Inquiry of Breaches, under 8 & 9 W.3, C. 11; Cognovit after Declaration: With Practical Forms and an Index* (London, 1833), xviii; E. Mackenzie, *A Descriptive and Historical Account of the Town and County of Newcastle Upon Tyne including the Borough of Gateshead* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1827), vi.

⁵⁴ DCRO, D/X/1355/1 Westgate Library, 1-4.

is consistent with the practices of other borrowers: Elisha Teasdale began at catalogue number four at the inception of the library and read through to number sixteen.⁵⁵ Methodism was at the heart of the library's collections, and it was clearly the authoritative denomination amongst members, as the rules gave authority to the local methodist minister to approve their book purchases. This Wesleyan canon was thus the foundation of the library, and the order in which the books were catalogued became the order in which they were read. When Joseph Fleming joined the library in 1801, he did not commence by reading all of the Wesleyan texts in order, so perhaps this was a practice particularly adopted by the first members as a way to regulate the borrowings from a smaller collection. Yet the linear reading pattern was not solely a practical, initial process, for Egglestone returned to the Wesleyan series over the years, borrowing numbers three to eighteen from November 1803 to January 1805, and borrowing books one to twelve from August 1812 to July 1813. Egglestone's three readings of these core methodist texts may have been inspired by personal piety; but the catalogue's structure clearly underpinned the order in which he read them.

In 1806 Egglestone discovered a new passion, for history. He began Hume's *History of England* in April, reading the first four volumes, albeit in an unconventional order. Then in August he selected volume three of Smollett's *History of England*. By October, he returned to volume seven and eight of Hume, and in December he read volume one of Smollett. These authors were consecutive in the catalogue, which seems to have led him from one to the other. In 1807 Egglestone also read 'Contin. of the Hist. of Eng.', as well as four volumes of Josephus' Works. These three historical series were only punctuated in the catalogue by one work, Drew's *Essay on the Immortality of the Soul*, which Egglestone indeed read between Smollett and Hume. Thus the catalogue's organisation certainly contributed to Egglestone's historical interests, affording him titles with similar subjects and styles once he had become intrigued by the genre.

Egglestone had a less controlled relationship with *Stackhouse's History of the Bible*. The library owned six volumes of this, and Egglestone struggled over a period of years to read all of them. In May 1794 he first encountered the *History of the Bible* through the fifth

⁵⁵ Ibid., 15.

volume. The following month he read the first volume. Two years later, he borrowed the first volume again, reading the second and third volumes in sequential months. He borrowed the fourth volume in May 1802, and the fifth volume (at which he began) in the following month. Finally, Egglestone borrowed volume six in January 1806, twelve years after he first encountered the work. Such frustrated attempts to make his way through the series must indicate a high demand amongst the reading community, whose choices were limited by the fact that they could only borrow twelve books a year. Egglestone often seems to have begun a sequential reading of this work only to find that he could not borrow the next book, at which point his enthusiasm lapsed. His dogged, albeit interrupted, desire to read all six volumes was eventually fulfilled, but this fragmented reading experience would have limited Egglestone's understanding of the synoptic meaning of this multi-volume work. It also contradicted associational attempts to encourage linear and organised reading, for he was incapable of acquiring the volumes in close succession.

Egglestone's most enduring fascination was with the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, of which the library owned 20 volumes. He used his monthly borrowing opportunity to withdraw an *Encyclopaedia* volume 50 times from 1808 to 1814, indicating that the focus of his reading had changed from religion to general knowledge. Despite Egglestone's obsession with the *Encyclopaedia*, he never borrowed three of the twenty volumes at all: numbers two, three and eighteen. He borrowed some of the volumes as many as five times (volume six and volume fifteen). This suggests a desire to actually read through each book, rather than glance through the entire series. This obsession with borrowing the *Encyclopaedia* was not unusual; James Pallister withdrew all twenty volumes consecutively, from May 1818 until June 1821. This uninterrupted run may be because there was less competition for the books at this stage, having been in the library for over ten years. However, it also shows that Pallister either read them at a consistent (and unlikely) monthly pace, or was content to return them after one month's consultation, regardless of his progress through them. Thus Pallister allowed the library structure of monthly borrowings to dictate his engagement with the text, adopting one month's perusal as an appropriate reading framework. Conversely, Egglestone clearly believed one month to be insufficient reading time for some of the

volumes, and so borrowed them repeatedly: however, the exigencies of re-issuing books meant he could not then guarantee a linear reading sequence.

Egglestone's original and most recurrent interest was in religious works, but he also went through phases of reading historical works, as well as the *Encyclopaedia*, showing a broadening out from his religious interests. To some extent, these penchants were also conditioned by the library catalogue, for the texts which he interspersed in his historical studies were grouped together. Furthermore, the overall pattern in his borrowings shows a progression through the catalogue as a whole. He did not read a work numbered above 50 in the catalogue until 1794, six years after the library's inception. He did not read a work numbered above 100 until 1806. Whilst we do not know exactly when each section of the catalogue was acquired, extant accounts suggest that they began to buy Hume's *History* in 1806, when Egglestone's reading phase started; and the *Encyclopaedia* in 1808.⁵⁶ Thus Egglestone's interests seem to have evolved as the library catalogue developed, indelibly linking his reading experience to the library acquisitions, catalogue, and organisation.

IV. Associational Structures: Borrowing Periods

An important way in which reading associations controlled the reading experiences of their members was by specifying borrowing periods for each book. Logically, this would seem to encourage extensive rather than intensive reading practices, mandating an exchange of books at least once a month. DeMaria argues that Samuel Johnson had relatively brief encounters with texts, quickly moving on to new material.⁵⁷ This culture of fast, transitory reading encounters would seem to be epitomised by reading associations. The rigours of borrowing deadlines also affected reading practices. Anne Lister made 'minutes & extracts

⁵⁶ DCRO, D/X/1355/1 Westgate Library, 220.

⁵⁷ DeMaria, *Samuel Johnson*, 62.

from Hall's Travels in France' because 'it must go to the library today'.⁵⁸ This suggests that she did not have the leisure time to thoroughly digest the text, so copied it out to reflect upon later. Likewise, George Ridpath 'revised some more of Colden's History of the Five Nations, which I intend to return to-morrow'.⁵⁹ Borrowing books from reading associations encouraged note-taking and transcription, to extend the usage of a work which could only be kept for a brief period. However, borrowing periods were not always restrictive: Ridpath read *Tristram Shandy* from the Kelso Library in a day, and read it 'over again' the next day.⁶⁰ William Temple, 'having run rapidly through Gibbon's Memoirs &c began them a second time, more leisurely'.⁶¹ Whilst borrowing periods were a constraint on the reading practice, they were voluntarily subscribed to, and were designed as reasonable periods of time in which readers could pursue their normal rhythms of reading.

The scale of borrowing times was an additional construct which the society imposed upon the reading material, explicitly valuing texts in relation to one another. The Chichester Book Society tabulated that five days should be allowed for every 200 pages of ordinary print, although factors like large types or wide margins were taken into consideration.⁶² Similarly, the 'Plan for a Book Society' written by Thomas Bennett into his commonplace book allowed two days for works under 100 pages.⁶³ This gives an interesting indication of the average speed that eighteenth-century readers were expected to progress through the book, dipping into forty or fifty pages each day. Often, borrowing times were based upon the size of the book, and penalties for late returns were highest for the largest formats.⁶⁴ In other examples, the society distinguished the borrowing times based on the financial value of the book, although this evidently correlated with their size.⁶⁵ These schema directly affected the readers' encounters with the text, determining the length of time for which they could read it, and imposed a value hierarchy on different types of text.

⁵⁸ *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*, ed. H. Whitbread (London, 2010), 124.

⁵⁹ *Diary of George Ridpath, Minister of Stichel, 1755-1761*, ed. J. Balfour Paul (Edinburgh, 1922), 17.

⁶⁰ *Ridpath*, 331.

⁶¹ *Diaries of William Johnston Temple, 1780-1796*, ed. L. Bettany (Oxford, 1929), 171.

⁶² *The Monthly Magazine; or, British Register Vol. XXII Part II for 1806* (London, 1806), 673.

⁶³ LPL, MS 3167 Bennett Commonplace Book 1792, 162.

⁶⁴ e.g. WYAS, Misc 5/96c/79 Halifax Circulating Library, 6; HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library Laws, 4; *Stamford* (1787), 8; *Macclesfield* (1796), 37; *Ayr* (1802), 5; *Dursley* (1818); *Doncaster* (1829), 11.

⁶⁵ CAC, WPR/59/1A Kendal Book Club Rules, 6; CAC, WPR/59/2 Sedbergh Book Club, 5; *London* (1800), 5.

What effect did these borrowing limitations have on the reading patterns of association members? The Caledonian Club borrowing records begin from 1807, and the borrowings of five members have been examined over a three-year period, 1807-1809.⁶⁶ These records list the catalogue number of the book(s) borrowed each month. Sadly, the catalogue no longer exists, so we do not know which texts the members were withdrawing. Nonetheless, the use of catalogue numbers rather than full titles shows that the catalogue was an important reference guide which was habitually referred to amongst the membership. The records also indicate that members sometimes borrowed consecutively-numbered works, inspired by the linearity of the catalogue's numbering. A striking feature of the Caledonian Club borrowings is the repetition of texts within them. In particular, texts were often borrowed and then re-borrowed in consecutive months, with three consecutive loans not being uncommon. In one seven-month period, John Sloane borrowed text number 13 three times, and text number 21 three times, with a one-month interlude with text 34. Three of the sampled members reissued a book seven times, so this was clearly not uncommon. This repeated re-issuing of a text seems to go against society structures. Rather than keeping an item for the designated reading period, members clearly felt they wanted a longer encounter with the book. They managed to achieve this through the formal mechanisms of the society, by returning and re-issuing it.

Another example of this intensive reading is given by the borrowing record of Joseph Fleming, active in the Westgate Library from 1801-1807.⁶⁷ Rather than reading through entire runs from the catalogue, Fleming consistently returned to certain books. He withdrew Fletcher's *An Appeal To Matter of Fact and Common Sense; Or, a Rational Demonstration of Man's Corrupt, Lost Estate* on seven separate occasions in six years, suggesting an intensive and ongoing reading of one volume. He also borrowed another of Fletcher's works, *A Polemical Essay on the Twin Doctrines of Christian Imperfection and a Death Purgatory*, four times, showing that he frequently studied the works of this clergyman. He also repeatedly borrowed the different volumes of Hurn's *Reflections*, and Stackhouse's *History of the Bible*. Fleming read narrow sections of the catalogue, preferring to deepen his knowledge

⁶⁶ BA, FZ/5/2 Caledonian Book Club Borrowing Records. Members John Sloane, John McMillan, William Walker, William Hope, Hugh Brydson.

⁶⁷ DCRO, D/X/1355/1 Westgate Library, 32-39.

of the authors he valued rather than capitalising on the library's wide selection. This reminds us that the existence of extensive and eclectic library catalogues does not necessarily mean that contemporaries' reading patterns had to follow this example.

These borrowing records show that repeat borrowing was a common practice in at least two reading associations. This goes against the ideas of speedy circulation and extensive reading, and rather suggests an intensive and ongoing consultation of one text for several months. These records show the persistence of intensive reading modes within extensive reading collections. It furthermore highlights the ability of the reader to resist or work within reading structures in order to fashion their own textual engagement.

V. Associational Structures: Format and Periodicals

The physical format of a text could carry distinct connotations of value and content, in the same way that genres encoded certain literary values: a poem about the Lewes Library Society referred to its 'pond'rous folios' and 'pigmy twelves'.⁶⁸ Jacobs argues that octavo and duodecimo formats were thought of as modern and useful due to their portability, and were further linked with certain types of text like novels and practical books.⁶⁹ Associational practice most clearly distinguished between textual formats in the case of periodicals and magazines. Periodical literature was necessarily ephemeral, and seems to have been more entwined with ideas of party and interests than other textual forms. At the same time, the topicality of periodicals made them desirable, and subscribers wished to read them as soon as possible. They were thus cheap and temporary, but also desirable and luxurious. How did reading associations respond to, or even generate, these discourses?

⁶⁸ J. Button, *The Lewes Library Society; a Poem* (London, 1804), 2.

⁶⁹ E. Jacobs, 'Buying into Classes: The Practice of Book Selection in Eighteenth-Century Britain', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Fall, 1999), 52.

Separate rules were often made for periodicals, distinguishing their reading practice as (usually) a much shorter encounter, encouraging a more rapid circulation through the society. The reason for this hurry is the fact that periodicals would quickly be superseded by new issues, at which point their time restrictions were usually relaxed, implying that their value was predominantly derived from their topicality. In the Dursley Reading Society, magazines were to be kept for four days, compared to 21 days for a quarto.⁷⁰ At Macclesfield Subscription Library the magazines were only to be kept for two days, and in Whitby only one day during the first month after publication.⁷¹ This hurried reading practice may be seen as a more scrappy and superficial encounter, but it also indicates the urgency and desirability of these texts when they were first issued.⁷² In some associations, this was solved by ordering multiple copies, or keeping them in the library when they were first acquired.⁷³ These practices both heightened members' interest in reading texts, and shortened their actual encounter with them. However, periodicals were not always topical by the time they reached readers: George Ridpath read 'the November Review' in January 1761, and 'the January and February Scots Magazines' in April.⁷⁴

Periodicals thus seem to have been a controversial, short-lived and inferior form of literature in the reading association. The Dursley Reading Society legislated that at the end of year sale, periodicals should be 'sold for what they will fetch', whereas other publications were expected to sell for at least half of their purchase price.⁷⁵ John Herschel, president of the Windsor and Eton Public Library, cautioned his members against prioritising the periodicals department, due to their 'ephemeral applause'.⁷⁶ Instead, energies and finances should be focused on the 'higher' texts which have a more 'useful destination', knowledge.⁷⁷ However, this was to be achieved by levying additional charges to access the periodical section, thus rendering it a more prestigious and expensive form of membership. Indeed, Herschel described periodical reading as 'a luxury and an indulgence, and should be paid for

⁷⁰ *Dursley* (1818), 4.

⁷¹ *Macclesfield* (1796), 37-38; *Whitby* (1814), 4.

⁷² See DeMaria, *Samuel Johnson*, 139-176.

⁷³ ACL, 027.441 Air Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776-1830, 106; *Oxford* (1809), 7; *Kelso* (1790), 71; *Stamford* (1787), 10.

⁷⁴ *Ridpath*, 363, 376.

⁷⁵ *Dursley* (1818), 3.

⁷⁶ J. Herschel, *An Address to the Subscribers to the Windsor and Eton Public Library and Reading-Room* (London, 1833), 12-13.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

accordingly'.⁷⁸ Whilst Herschel outlined the principal flaws of periodicals, their temporality and thus their usefulness, he nevertheless admitted that they were still desirable. Indeed, conflicting responses to such ephemeral works seem characteristic of readers in this period. In the Hull Subscription Library, the pamphlet committee noted that there were 'several works, treating on subjects of merely local, or temporary, or even partial interest only'.⁷⁹ The overall thrust of this phrasing suggests that these forms of partial interest were thought inferior to works which were of universal utility. Nonetheless, the committee decided that these pamphlets should be kept as objects of 'curiosity if not utility'.⁸⁰ Therefore, there was a tension between topicality and permanence, which complicated reading association practice and the reading experience of its members.

How did periodicals actually circulate within reading associations? The Barnard Castle Book Club circulation lists indicate a perhaps common practice: distributing smaller ephemeral works in tandem with expensive books. This was particularly the case for periodicals. *Blackwood's Magazine* for August was passed with a text noted as 'Van Diemen's Land' in November 1833.⁸¹ *Blackwood's* and *The Literary Magazine* were both passed with Hodges' *Portugal* in December 1833; by this time, the two periodicals were significantly outdated, being from July and June respectively.⁸² Clearly, the periodicals were seen as a less significant work, for they were 'passed with' the main subject of the circulation list. The Barnard Castle Book Club's treatment of periodicals meant that they were kept for as many days as longer works of literature, and thus became very outdated by the time they had circulated through the membership. Rather than acting as a notice of new publications, therefore, they would perhaps have served more as reviews than as advertisements. Indeed, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* were circulated along with a penny 'American Review of Ditto', suggesting that the review was used as a summary, gloss or critical accompaniment to the work itself.⁸³

As has already been shown, periodicals were an important structure in the burgeoning literary market. Towsey examined the diary of George Ridpath, who expressed

⁷⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁹ HHC, UDSL/13 Hull Subscription Library, 15. The idea of local interests is significant, and will be analysed in Chapter Six.

⁸⁰ HHC, UDSL/13 Hull Subscription Library, 16.

⁸¹ DCRO, D/HH/10/2/2 Barnard Castle Book Club Circulation Book, 92.

⁸² Ibid., 101.

⁸³ Ibid., 115.

his opinions of Adam Smith in 'the wider framework provided by the professional critical reviews'.⁸⁴ Likewise, Colclough noted that Hunter's reading choices were guided by reviews, although he did not always concur with their opinions.⁸⁵ Fergus argues that reviews were in fact more influential in guiding associational purchases than private ones.⁸⁶ Undoubtedly, reviews were important to associations, for some stipulated that book proposals should cite a relevant review.⁸⁷ The Eclectic Book Society even named itself after its favoured review volume.⁸⁸ This focus on periodical literature has led to an assumption that reading practices were moving downwards from studious reading to hurried practices of 'mere reading'.⁸⁹ However, reading associations often permitted a book to be loaned out at the same time as a periodical or pamphlet.⁹⁰ Doncaster Subscription Library concluded that 'pamphlets and periodical publications are not included in this legislation' about how many books could be borrowed, showing they were treated as a supplementary category of borrowings.⁹¹ Thus the physical format of the periodical or pamphlet seems to have been an important component of its value. It became a supplementary form of reading. It could be read in tandem with the main book that had been borrowed, or was perhaps light relief from it. Occasionally the two may have interrelated, as at Barnard Castle, where a book was circulated with its review. Periodicals did not come to dominate reading practice, transforming it to 'mere reading', but rather supplemented and acted as 'stabilisers' which helped to induct readers into appropriate practices.

⁸⁴ Towsey, *Reading*, 169.

⁸⁵ Colclough, 'Procuring Texts', 35.

⁸⁶ Fergus, *Provincial Readers*, 5, 53.

⁸⁷ Allan, *Nation*, 86; ACL, 027.441 Air Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776-1830, 60; *Manchester* (1794), 78; *Paisley* (1802), 1. Review references in LRO, 027 LYC 2/1 Liverpool Lyceum Proposal Book.

⁸⁸ LMA, CLC/064/MS00988A The Eclectic Book Society Minute Book 1812-1820.

⁸⁹ DeMaria, *Samuel Johnson*, 18.

⁹⁰ E.g. *Leeds* (1785), 101; HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library Laws, 4; *Manchester* (1794), 77; *Macclesfield* (1796), 35; *York Book Society* (1797), 9; *Oxford* (1809), 7; *Lincoln* (1814), 14; *Hull* (1822), xii; *Edinburgh* (1823), 10; *Ludlow* (1823), 5.

⁹¹ *Doncaster* (1829), 13.

VI. Conclusion: The Reading Community and Propriety

The foregoing analysis of associational structures has shown that members' encounters with texts were physically and conceptually subject to the authority of the association, and were affected by the remnants of other members' reading experiences. At the same time, the case studies have shown that various readers were able to usurp the reading paradigms suggested by the society, by re-issuing the same works over many months. Clearly, the association provided certain infrastructures which broadly framed the reading experience, but there was room for individual adaptation too.

Reading associations could be viewed as a resource, a free, democratic space which did not purvey value systems or agendas.⁹² Indeed, the members' collective decision-making and literary engagement has led David Allan to conclude that 'libraries allowed readers themselves to help shape taste and to define the emerging canon'.⁹³ Yet many reading associations gave some legislative guidelines as to the type of reading material that they would purchase. These usually referenced standards of propriety which would be upheld, ensuring that all books chosen were 'proper'.⁹⁴ If rogue works were unintentionally admitted, many associations made it clear that they would suppress books which 'are discovered to have an immoral tendency', which led to the burning of Thomas Paine's works in the Ayr Library Society.⁹⁵ In the Westgate Library in Durham, one of the fixed rules was that all book choices would be approved by the local Methodist minister to ensure they were not hurtful to morality, although this religious oversight was unusual amongst associations.⁹⁶ The language of morality was thus important to this form of sociability, and to reading practices.

Usually, these standards of propriety were to be upheld by the committee, who had the final responsibility for ordering the books in just under half of the associations examined;

⁹² J. Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge, 2001), 106.

⁹³ D. Allan, 'Circulation', in P. Garside and K. O'Brien (eds), *English and British Fiction, 1750-1820* (Oxford, 2015), 58.

⁹⁴ WYAS, Misc 5/96c/79 Halifax Circulating Library, 6; CAC, WPR/59/2 Sedbergh Book Club, 2; HL, MS 5/27 Wigtown Subscription Library, 3; *Whitby* (1814), 7; *Ludlow* (1823), 7; *London* (1800), 4; *Paisley* (1802), 3; *Ayr* (1802), 5; WCRO, CR304 Shipston-upon-Stour Reading Society Rules 1828.

⁹⁵ ACL, 027.441 Air Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776-1830, 73. See also *Leeds* (1785), 96; *Exeter* (1808), 11; *Oxford* (1809), 5; *Kilmarnock* (1811), 6; *Hull* (1822), viii.

⁹⁶ DCRO, D/X/1355/1 Westgate Library, 10.

the rest of the associations depended on the self-regulation of the membership.⁹⁷ In Ayr Library, the committee were to consider the books' 'merit and importance'; at Paisley Library Society it was their 'high character and general utility', and in Glasgow Public Library their 'approved merit'.⁹⁸ Conversely, in the Liverpool Lyceum, a reportedly 'very indecent and improper book' was 'no longer suffered to circulate, except amongst such of the committee as chuse to see it & report to the next meeting'.⁹⁹ This highlights the committee's status as a body with moral and intellectual authority over the mass of the membership. Reading was subject to decorum and standards of taste which were policed by these overseers, and by the community itself.

Historians have already noted the influence of reviews and periodicals over standards of literary taste.¹⁰⁰ This critical authority was revered by reading associations, which often demanded that book proposals were accompanied by citation of a positive review.¹⁰¹ The Paisley Library Society asked for 'the character of the work, or a reference to some review where it may be found'.¹⁰² Reviews thus helped to establish the moral 'character' of the books, but doubtless also indicated whether they were fashionable and esteemed, and thus worthy of purchase. In associations where books were selected by a majority decision, reviews seem to have been important. At the Sedbergh and Kendal Book Clubs, the members currently in possession of the reviews were fined if they did not bring them back before club night, implying that they were used in the meetings.¹⁰³ In the associations which used committees to decide on books, reviews were arguably even more important, as the committees' authority over the selection of books derived from their adherence to principles of good taste as mediated by review literature. Committees were given special access to the reviews: at the Leeds Circulating Library, they could take them home while the library was closed, and at the Hull Subscription Library, reviews were 'appropriated to the use of the

⁹⁷ *London* (1785), 2; *Leeds* (1785), 95; *Halifax* (1786), 65; *Stamford* (1787), 10; HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library Laws, 3; *Manchester* (1794), 78; *Macclesfield* (1796), 39; *Bristol* (1798), vi; *Dalkeith* (1798), 8; *Ayr* (1802), 5; *Oxford* (1809), 5; *Lincoln* (1814), 8; *Hull* (1822), viii; *Edinburgh* (1823), 6; *Ludlow* (1823), 7; *Doncaster* (1829), 11.

⁹⁸ *Ayr* (1802), 5; *Paisley* (1802), 8; *Glasgow* (1810), vii.

⁹⁹ LRO, 027 LYC 1/2/1 Liverpool Lyceum Committee Minute Book, October 1775.

¹⁰⁰ Van Horn Melton, *Rise*, 115; B. Maidment, 'Periodicals and Serial Publications, 1780-1830', in M. F. Suarez, S. J. Michael and M. L. Turner (eds), *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain: Volume 5 1695-1830* (Cambridge, 2009), 498-512.

¹⁰¹ See page 91.

¹⁰² *Paisley* (1802), 11.

¹⁰³ CAC, WPR/59/2 Sedbergh Book Club, 5; CAC, WPR/59/1A Kendal Book Club Rules, 8.

Committee'.¹⁰⁴ When the committee of the Hull Subscription Library had their review-privileges revoked, this was denounced by a library member as 'a species of Egyptian policy...taking away the allowance of straw, and yet requiring the same tale of bricks'.¹⁰⁵ The reviews were thus seen as essential tools for the community's literary choices.

The reading association's committee therefore acted as the community's regulators, adhering to the broader standards of contemporary literary culture as mediated through reviews. Furthermore, the reading association's authority over reading practice was emphasised by the imposition of a body of rules. In some associations, these were displayed on the walls of the library, thus physically dominating the reading environment.¹⁰⁶ In the Ayr Library Society, subscribers were enjoined to regularly sign the parchment of regulations, emphasising their submission to the authority of the association.¹⁰⁷ In the Liverpool Lyceum, notices were hung of subscribers who were in arrears, or thought to be abroad or dead, so that their executors could settle their accounts: information about these individuals was displayed publicly, and this held them to account.¹⁰⁸ In the Exeter Library Society, a notice was hung asking subscribers to report any damage to the books, thus enlisting the community in the enforcement of careful reading practices.¹⁰⁹ The reader was accountable to the association's hierarchy, which policed the morality of reading activities, and to the literary and behavioural standards which the association sought to represent. They were given tools to assist them in appropriate reading: the provision of periodicals as supplementary reading material, as well as the rationally ordered catalogues which could guide linear reading.

However, it is clear that the associations' prescriptions were not always followed through in their members' practices. Are we thus focusing on the associations' stated purposes rather than their actual effects? Diaries give some indication of readers' positive responses to associational leadership. William Holland, after examining the Stowey Book Club's books, remarked they 'they are very judiciously chosen', showing that this member believed that the community had exercised appropriate perspicacity in their selections.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴ *Leeds* (1785), 96; HHC, UDSL/50 Hull Subscription Library Standing Rules, 32.

¹⁰⁵ Wilson, Sykes, 11.

¹⁰⁶ *Hull* (1822), xi.

¹⁰⁷ ACL, 027.441 Air Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776-1830, 9.

¹⁰⁸ LRO, 027 LYC 1/2/1 Liverpool Lyceum Committee Minute Book, March 1774.

¹⁰⁹ DA, Z19/41/1 Exeter Library Society Minutes 1777-1789, 66.

¹¹⁰ *Paupers and Pig Killers: The Diary of William Holland, A Somerset Parson 1799-1818*, ed. J. Ayres (Gloucester, 1984), 28.

John Marsh believed that Chichester Book Society's policy of requiring book proposers to buy them back at half price would 'prevent trifling or improper books from being order'd'.¹¹¹ Anne Lister recorded her disappointment that 'I have hitherto wandered over too many books with too little thought', and William Temple was dissatisfied with his 'trifling' reading practices.¹¹² This chapter has suggested that reading associations provided a structured environment for such self-conscious readers, encouraging proper, orderly, careful reading. Poems described the Paisley Library Society's 'noblest task t'improve the mind', and another library that 'for noblest motives was design'd, That morals might be more refin'd... An' to improve each studious mind', reflecting a perception that the associations had these edifying effects.¹¹³ Charlotte Yonge reflected that, in book clubs, 'every one was responsible to all the rest', and 'the plan prevented an immense amount of mischievous reading'.¹¹⁴ Whilst the rules of the associations were not slavishly followed, the paradigms which they laid out appealed to, and were ratified by, their readers. Samuel Curwen went to the Exeter Library where he 'read a catalogue of Books and rules': these rules cannot be dismissed as purely theoretical, but rather affected readers' choices, even if their response was to consciously reject the proposed method.¹¹⁵

The converse of the associations' authority was the legitimacy which they conferred on their readers. In the Liverpool Lyceum, the privilege of participating in the reading community was clearly expressed by the use of a 'barricade' which prevented access to the library.¹¹⁶ Other libraries provided their members with marks of their membership: the Malton Subscription Library readers had a 'ticket signed by the president of the committee', and the Hull Subscription Library planned to give every member an impression of the seal of their founder.¹¹⁷ Others struck medals which were used for admission.¹¹⁸ These trinkets were a

¹¹¹ *The John Marsh Journals: The Life and Times of a Gentleman Composer (1752-1828)*, ed. B. Robins (Stuyvesant, 1998), 453.

¹¹² *Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*, 163. See also *William Johnston Temple*, 52.

¹¹³ T. Crichton, 'The Library', in T. Leonard (ed.), *Radical Renfrew: Poetry from the French Revolution to the First World War* (Edinburgh, 1990); P. Forbes, 'The Library', in *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Edinburgh, 1812), 10.

¹¹⁴ V. Sanders (ed.), *Records of Girlhood: An Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Women's Childhoods* (Aldershot, 2000), 216.

¹¹⁵ *The Journal of Samuel Curwen, Loyalist*, ed. A. Oliver, 2 Vols (Cambridge, MA, 1972), ii. 524.

¹¹⁶ LRO, 027 LYC 1/2/1 Liverpool Lyceum Committee Minute Book, May 1771, January 1776.

¹¹⁷ HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library Laws, 1; HHC, UDSL/50 Hull Subscription Library Standing Rules, 15; *Stamford* (1787), 10: 'printed card'; *A Catalogue of the Books belonging to the Public Library and to the City Library of Norwich* (Norwich, 1825), v: 'ticket'.

¹¹⁸ *A Catalogue of the Amicable Society's Library in Lancaster* (Lancaster, 1794), 3; 027 LYC 1/2/1 Liverpool Lyceum Committee Minute Book, July 1772.

physical reminder to readers of their privileged membership, which configured them as a legitimate reader, as well as a subject of the moral authority of the organisation.

It was these structures of authority and accountability which were the most innovative influence on reading practices, for they reified the standards of taste, and helped to generate a national literary culture. The structures which a society imposed, whether standards of propriety, rules about the handling or circulation of books, or models of orderly reading, were sustained and legitimated by the association's own position as the mediator of literary culture to its members. They introduced a standard model of 'polite' associational reading practice which applied regardless of the text in question. Even if two members of a book club or subscription library had not read a single common text in a year, they were still united by their common subscription to the community, its ideas and its literary culture. This is not the same as communal reading which was predicated on a shared encounter with a text, for example a family's oral reading of a Bible or a play. These associations were not only (or necessarily) united by what was read, but by the codified attitudes and ideologies which informed the reading process. The foundation of fee-paying, rule-abiding reading communities made communal reading into public reading.

Chapter Three

Representations and Values

I. Introduction

Reading associations were a widespread and popular institution of later eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century provincial culture. In 1821 *The Monthly Magazine* reported that there were 6,500 reading societies and literary institutions in the United Kingdom.¹ Based on the number of book clubs, permanent libraries and magazine societies, William St Clair calculated that 30,000 families were involved in this branch of associational culture.² References to over 400 separate reading associations were found in the research materials for this thesis, with some of these institutions totalling up to 400 members: several thousands of readers were thus involved in the associations considered in this thesis alone.³ Why did so many men and women in the eighteenth century belong to reading associations, and what were the social and cultural effects of this popular pastime? What did the rest of their contemporaries think about their activities?

A range of reasons have been postulated as to why individuals might have joined associations, although it is clear that no single motivation can be conclusively ascribed to all members. Peter Clark, surveying the proliferation of associations throughout this period, suggests that this phenomenon was underpinned by the idea of 'improvement', although there was diversity between associations, and variety in the motivations of their members.⁴

¹ *The Monthly Magazine; Or, British Register*, Vol. LI Part I for 1821 (London, 1821), 397.

² W. St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge, 2004), 265.

³ e.g. Moseley-Street Library, Manchester, in *The Monthly Magazine; Or, British Register*, Vol. XXI Part I for 1806 (London, 1806), 206.

⁴ P. Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford, 2000), 85, 194-195, 491.

What did 'improvement' mean in this context? Sociability, power, and economic self-determination could all have been facilitated by banding together with others.⁵ In particular, reading associations offered 'politeness, sociability, and, above all, improvement' according to Mark Towsey.⁶ It is the potent combination of a sociable organisation, focused on reading as a potentially instructive and rational activity, which made reading associations a particular exemplar of the age of improvement.⁷ Polly Bull noted a 'belief in the power of reading to stimulate improvement' amongst contemporary diarists,⁸ and this reflects a broader idea that 'any claim to participate in the "polite world" depended in part on a capacity to read, think and speak correctly'.⁹ This chapter will examine which forms of improvement, such as social finesse, spiritual nourishment or knowledge acquisition, reading associations were most concerned with. Peter Burke elaborates upon sub-categories of knowledge, such as the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge, between liberal (classical) and useful (trade) knowledge, and between general and specialised knowledge.¹⁰ How did these categories factor into the self-presentation of reading associations?

This chapter will consider how reading associations represented their values and purposes, using a variety of materials such as statements of purpose, book labels, and newspaper advertisements. Reconstructing their discourse across this variety of representational modes will be the most comprehensive survey of reading association values yet undertaken, providing a rounded picture of the impression which members, and outsiders, had about reading associations' purposes. This redresses a historiography which has principally focused on associations' statements of purpose, or which has derived an understanding of associations' philosophies from a general account of their activities and outcomes.

⁵ J. Barry, 'Bourgeois Collectivism? Urban Association and the Middling Sort', in J. Barry and C. Brooks (eds), *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550-1800* (Basingstoke, 1994), 100-103; J. Brewer, 'Commercialization and Politics', in N. McKendrick, J. Brewer and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1982), 200.

⁶ M. R. M. Towsey, *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment: Books and Their Readers in Provincial Scotland, 1750-1820* (Leiden, 2010), 57.

⁷ D. Allan, *A Nation of Readers: The Lending Library in Georgian England* (London, 2008), 107.

⁸ P. E. Bull, 'The Reading Lives of English Men and Women, 1695-1830', Unpublished PhD Thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London 2012, 12.

⁹ L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (London, 1987), 156.

¹⁰ P. Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge: from Gutenberg to Diderot* (Cambridge, 2000), 83-84.

In addition to associations' own publications and newspaper advertisements, external representations of reading associations will be examined, including fictional portrayals, town guides and local histories, to see whether reading association discourses were perpetuated or challenged in other print forms. A simple distinction between 'inside' and 'outside' representations of reading associations is problematic, as newspaper reports could have been written by reading association members, and town guides could have been penned by them. Instead, it is perhaps better to think of this selection of sources as spanning a spectrum, from media closely controlled and created by reading associations, to representations which were not accountable to, or regulated by, them. In total, these print and visual sources show the cultural visibility of reading associations in this period, and the resonance of their values.

As well as examining their values, this chapter will address why people participated in reading associations. The associations' own statements of purpose elaborate upon the cultural preoccupations and values of their membership, analysing their attitudes towards sociability, reading, and community. Historians are generally in agreement that reading associations were predominantly middle-class institutions.¹¹ However, this is a catholic description of an ill-defined social group. David Allan emphasised the variety amongst reading associations and their members, noting that they accommodated readers ranging from the aristocracy, to tradesmen, and women: they were not linked to a single occupational profile or social stratum.¹² Thus he concludes that the collective identity of a reading association probably did not equate to anything more than 'mutual identification' based on a shared interest in books and learning.¹³

Despite the occupational variety of these middling sorts, associations unified 'the respectable, the ambitious and the well heeled' who were also likely to be the most literate in their area.¹⁴ Allan emphasises the sociability of these institutions, and suggests that membership of reading communities provided a 'widely credited marker of personal status'.¹⁵

¹¹ P. Kaufman, 'English Book Clubs and Their Social Import', in P. Kaufman, *Libraries and their Users: Collected Papers in Library History* (London, 1969), 58; T. Kelly, *Early Public Libraries: A History of Public Libraries in Great Britain before 1850* (London, 1966), 127; Towsey, *Reading*, 56, 61.

¹² Allan, *Nation*, 225.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14. See also 35, 66.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 210.

Likewise, William St Clair argues that members of reading societies were ‘the leaders of local life, a social, economic and intellectual elite’.¹⁶ How did this ‘elite’ represent itself, and what characteristics did it use to justify its perceived superiority over others?

This chapter will not seek to present alternative analyses of the socio-demographic make-up of reading associations, agreeing that the limitations of literacy and wealth meant that access was restricted to those of comfortable means. Instead, it will consider associational membership in relation to status, defined as a relative social understanding of an individual’s worth, based on a nuanced calculation of factors including wealth, influence, reputation and personal virtue. Considering members’ status rather than supposedly quantitative categories of socio-demographic position allows room for their own self-determination of their social standing, rather than imposing modern definitions of social position which were not necessarily understood or experienced by these people.

Various historians have outlined the growing fluidity and usage of the terminology of ‘the gentleman’ in this period.¹⁷ Penelope Corfield explains that the title of gentleman, originating in elite ideas of ‘knightly chivalry and valour’, evolved to represent ‘civilian and humanist’ meanings.¹⁸ It was not a closely controlled appellation, but rather depended on ‘social negotiation’, involving ‘display’ and ‘public acceptance’.¹⁹ The use of ‘gentleman’ was now a claim to a meritocratic, virtuous identity, which opened the door to those who sought status through new sources of prestige and wealth. Henry French argues that the discourse of ‘gentility’ enabled the local elites (or ‘chief inhabitants’) in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to lay claim to status beyond their parish environment.²⁰ It was a universal concept, but was also a negotiated performance which ‘required a degree of evaluation, assimilation and approval’.²¹ French suggests that Steven Shapin’s model, in which scientific ‘truths’ were legitimated by the social standing of their proponents, may have ‘worked in reverse, with individuals seeking sanction for their gentlemanly credentials by

¹⁶ St Clair, *Nation*, 258.

¹⁷ P. Corfield, *Power and the Professions in Britain 1700-1850* (London, 1995), 12; P. J. Corfield, ‘The Rivals: Landed and Other Gentlemen’, in N. B. Harte and R. Quinault (eds), *Land and Society in Britain, 1700-1914* (Manchester, 1996), 1-33; H. R. French, ‘“Ingenious & Learned Gentlemen” - Social Perceptions and Self-Fashioning among Parish Elites in Essex, 1680-1740’, *Social History*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Jan., 2000), 44-66.

¹⁸ Corfield, ‘Rivals’, 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁰ H. R. French, *The Middle Sort of People in Provincial England, 1600-1750* (Oxford, 2007), 260.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 243.

contributing “truthfull” empirical scientific observations to the “commonwealth of learning”.²² Although French’s period of study ends in the middle of the eighteenth century, this thesis argues that the proliferation of provincial reading associations in the latter half of the century provided an institutional embodiment of the pursuit of status through claims to learning and knowledge.

Overall, this chapter argues that knowledge had become a vector of virtue which was involved in considerations of status in this period. It argues that the prevalence and variety of reading associations made them the most accessible type of organisation which aligned their members with the pursuit of this knowledge. Reading associations reflected broader social trends in the construction of status through the possession, and public use, of knowledge. Rosemary Sweet, in her study of antiquaries, argues that engaging in antiquarian scholarship was ‘in itself a mark of social status’, because it was a gentlemanly pursuit which sacrificed time and leisure for the public good.²³ Likewise, Corfield demonstrated the centrality of knowledge to the ‘mystery’ of the professions through the eighteenth century.²⁴ Rather than a general term for an occupation, a ‘profession’ became linked to specialist knowledge within a trade, and also had a ‘distinctive ethos’ of public service, or civic morality.²⁵ Professional reputation was partly achieved through bodies which regulated and policed their practitioners, such as the London Law Institution, the Surgeons’ Company, and at least 40 local medical organisations by 1832.²⁶ Corfield suggests this ‘group voluntarism’ developed cohesion and communication within professional communities in different regions, superseding political divisions and personal rivalries.²⁷ In many ways, Corfield’s characterisation of professional associations is redolent of reading associations, which sought knowledge as the basis of claims to local respectability and wisdom. However, reading associations’ ‘mental capital’ was broadly based, specifically prohibiting professional and specialist works. They were composed of a variety of middling professionals as well as merchants and gentry, and thus represented an inter- and extra-professional alliance based

²² French, “Ingenious & Learned Gentlemen”, 59.

²³ R. Sweet, *Antiquaries: The Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London, 2004), 31.

²⁴ Corfield, *Power*, 20.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 19, 25, 201.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 84, 154, 160.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 84, 214-215, 206, 209.

on a shared attitude towards knowledge, which had become a marker of honour, principle and individual merit.

This chapter will begin by analysing references to reading associations across contemporary print culture, followed by an analysis of their self-representation through print and visual sources. Finally, newspapers will be examined to show how associations represented themselves to their local reading publics.

II. Representation of Associations in Print Culture

In the historiography, reading associations are generally fitted in to the paradigm of Georgian polite sociability: Clark's 'associational world'.²⁸ Scientific clubs and learned societies are seen to have served as 'cultural outlets for [the] upwardly mobile'.²⁹ Reading associations feature within Peter Borsay's account of the urban renaissance, as part of urban 'polite leisure activities'.³⁰ St Clair suggested that book clubs and subscription libraries were 'associated with male pursuits, e.g. dining, drinking and debating'.³¹ Allan argued that 'the seductive Addisonian account of sociability' was an important inspiration for reading associations.³² Towsey draws attention to reading association members who did not avail themselves of the library facilities, thus showing they subscribed due to 'the cultural allure of polite sociability' rather than a desire for reading matter.³³ Of course, the associations' serious intellectual purposes are also recognised, and have been most strongly asserted by

²⁸ Clark, *Clubs*.

²⁹ J. Golinski, *Science as Public Culture: Chemistry and Enlightenment in Britain, 1760-1820* (Cambridge, 1992), 58.

³⁰ P. Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660-1770* (Oxford, 1989), 147-148. R. J. Morris, *Men, Women and Property in England, 1780-1870: a Social and Economic History of Family Strategies amongst the Leeds Middle Classes* (Cambridge, 2005), 23 describes subscription libraries as 'spaces for politeness'.

³¹ St Clair, *Nation*, 263.

³² Allan, *Nation*, 13. See also Allan, *Nation*, 107; D. Allan, 'Politeness and the Politics of Culture: An Intellectual History of the Eighteenth-Century Subscription Library', *Library and Information History*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Sept., 2013), 159, 164.

³³ Towsey, *Reading*, 87.

Keith Manley, who said they intended to be ‘havens of learning and literature’.³⁴ Towsey has demonstrated the prevalence of the language of ‘usefulness’ and ‘utility’ in subscription libraries’ self-representation.³⁵ Bob Harris and Charles McKean consider Scottish subscription libraries to be ‘a clear indicator of the rapid diffusion of self-improvement attitudes’.³⁶ This was a particularly potent combination of sociability and intellectual improvement: speaking of subscription libraries, Allan suggests they established their members’ ‘enlightened credentials’.³⁷ Towsey summarises this constellation of interlinked advantages by highlighting subscription libraries’ ‘pursuit of politeness, sociability, and, above all, improvement’.³⁸ This chapter returns to the basics, asking how contemporaries portrayed associations, and what types of improvement they were primarily thought to offer.

3.1 Context of References to Reading Associations in ECCO

Category	Percentage of Results (0 decimal places)
Subscription list	66
Comment on association	8
History/description	7
Fictional reference	7
Society’s own publication	5
Biography/personal experience	4
Donation	2

In order to examine how reading associations were represented within print culture, I have searched Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO) for book club/society, reading club/society, subscription library and library society. I considered hits from 1760 onwards, and excluded results which referred to associations outside of England and Scotland, or to institutions which were not devoted to the acquisition and circulation of books amongst a

³⁴ K. A. Manley, ‘Jeremy Bentham has been Banned: Contention and Censorship in Private Subscription Libraries before 1825’, *Library and Information History*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Sept., 2013), 170.

³⁵ M. R. M. Towsey, “All Partners may be Enlightened and Improved by Reading Them”: the Distribution of Enlightenment Books in Scottish Subscription Library Catalogues, 1750-c.1820’, *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2008), 39.

³⁶ B. Harris and C. McKean, *The Scottish Town in the Age of the Enlightenment 1740-1820* (Edinburgh, 2014), 388.

³⁷ Allan, *Nation*, 70-71.

³⁸ Towsey, *Reading*, 57.

membership community, such as religious book *distribution* societies. In total, there were 327 hits which fulfilled these criteria. Table 3.1 categorises these hits to show the context in which they referred to reading associations.

The predominant context in which reading associations were mentioned in contemporary literary culture was in subscription lists. The act of subscribing to a publication was essentially a way to order an advance copy of it. However, subscribing also constructed the customer as a patron, and led to their inclusion in published subscription lists alongside aristocratic and erudite cultural figures. It was thus an act of self-promotion and deliberate self-alignment with certain texts and patrons, as well as a simple mechanism for purchasing the work. Table 3.2 shows that subscriptions were mainly to works of three genres (as defined by ECCO): literature and language, religion and philosophy, and history and geography. This spread across three genres is broadly consistent with the purchasing practices outlined in chapter one, which suggested that reading associations read across a range of genres rather than devoting themselves to one literary focus. In my research sample, literature constituted an average 23% of purchases, followed by history and lives at 21%, non-fiction at 15%, and religion and philosophy at 14%.

3.2 Associational Book Subscriptions by Genre

Genre	Percentage of Subscriptions (0 decimal places)
Literature and Language	31
Religion and Philosophy	27
History and Geography	21
Science, Medicine and Technology	7
Social Sciences	6
Fine Arts	5
General Reference	4
Law	0

The major difference between reading associations' purchasing patterns and subscription patterns, therefore, is that religious texts accounted for 27% of subscriptions, but

only an average of 14% of purchases. The disproportionate rate of subscription to religious and philosophical texts suggests that it was seen as particularly desirable and prestigious to subscribe to these works. Furthermore, the titles of these works primarily relate to Christian religion, including sermons, rather than more abstract philosophy: in terms of public appearances, these subscriptions allied reading association members with Christian religion and traditional social values. The 101 subscriptions to religious works from within the ECCO search range from 1760 to 1809, with an average date of 1787, showing that this interest in subscribing to religious material continued until the early nineteenth century.

Several themes emerge when considering the other references to reading associations within this ECCO sample of contemporary print culture. They are often portrayed as polite institutions, with one source depicting reading associations as 'a certain criterion of elegant refinement' displaying 'superior taste and good sense'.³⁹ One book was dedicated to the ladies of the Woodbridge Book Society, which was described as 'laudable', and 'so respectable a circle', where the author hopes his 'little Publication... [can] seek for shelter'.⁴⁰ Associations were construed as part of the 'reading age', a cultural resource.⁴¹ Dr Johnson, with perhaps a hint of irony, remarked that Lichfield had not yet heard of Fanny Burney's *Evelina*: 'but the days of darkness are soon to be at an end; the reading society ordered it to be procured this week'.⁴² These are familiar constructions of 'polite' society, in which reading associations were bastions of respectability and taste.

Fictional representations of reading associations developed this impression. In Edmund Marshall's novel *Edmund and Eleonora*, a baronet instigated a monthly book club. He proposed to 'attend somewhat earlier than the other members, and, for the general convenience of the neighbours, hold a monthly Bed of Justice'.⁴³ This aligned reading associations with local elites and office-holders, intertwining genteel governance and sociability. In *A Country Carpenter's Confession of Faith*, a loyalist tract wrongly attributed to Hannah More,⁴⁴ the protagonist's virtue is displayed through a description that he is 'as good a figure at our book-club as any man in it, except the Schoolmaster, Sir John's Steward, and

³⁹ W. Dyde, *The History and Antiquities of Tewkesbury* (Tewksbury, 1798), 81.

⁴⁰ J. Black, *The Vale of Innocence: A Vision. Verses to an Infant Daughter, and Sonnets on Several Subjects* (Woodbridge, 1785), 2.

⁴¹ *The European Magazine, and London Review*, Vol. 24 (London, 1793), 13.

⁴² S. Johnson, *Letters to and from the late Samuel Johnson LL.D.*, 2 Vols (London, 1788), ii, 221.

⁴³ E. Marshall, *Edmund and Eleonora*, 2 Vols (Margate, 1797), i, 137.

⁴⁴ A. Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian* (Oxford, 2003), 145-146.

the vicar'.⁴⁵ This reinforced the hierarchy of local roles, suggesting that reading associations displayed the social credentials of local worthies, and the virtuous study of others.

Reading associations were also mentioned in town histories and guides, showing their inclusion within the cultural life of their locality. Indeed, William Hutton briefly mentioned that 'the intentions of the book club are well known', suggesting they were a ubiquitous feature of contemporary life.⁴⁶ Often, these references simply detail the association's foundation date and admission charges. A book society was listed alongside the sick society and a Sunday school in Fuller's account of the Cannon-Street congregation in Birmingham, part of their line-up of religious and philanthropic institutions.⁴⁷ If town histories expanded upon the values of reading associations, they often focused on their intellectual benefits: Brewster wrote that the Stockton-upon-Tees Book Club 'has been of singular advantage to the town', and the subscription library 'will be an increasing fund of literary improvement'.⁴⁸ In the Chester and Worcestershire Guides, subscription libraries were vaunted for their well-chosen selection of books; in Kirkcudbright the library was described as having the 'best modern books', and the Bristol Library had a 'large select collection... of the best editions'.⁴⁹ On the whole, these publications praised the institution as a repository of books and local institutional resource, rather than as a sociable organisation.

An account of a book society in Nithsdale, Scotland, originally published as an appendix to Sinclair's *Statistical Account*, referred to a library society which was supported by a local benefactor, 'to store the minds of the lower classes with useful knowledge'.⁵⁰ This local paternalism was focused on 'improvement' and 'rationality', harnessing the 'innocent and laudable amusement' of reading for improving purposes.⁵¹ The author of this account thought that this institution 'deserve[s] the notice of every country gentleman', suggesting it was an exemplar for enlightened social improvement.⁵² Involvement in reading associations

⁴⁵ 'H. More', *A Country Carpenter's Confession of Faith* (London, 1794), 5.

⁴⁶ W. Hutton, *An History of Birmingham, to the end of 1780* (Birmingham, 1781), 138.

⁴⁷ A. Fuller, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. Samuel Pearce, A. M., Minister of the Gospel in Birmingham* (Clipstone, 1800), 209.

⁴⁸ J. Brewster, *The Parochial History and Antiquities of Stockton upon Tees* (Stockton, 1796), 103.

⁴⁹ *The Chester Guide* (Chester, 1781), 32; J. Grundy, *The Worcestershire Guide* (Worcester, 1797), 74; J. Sinclair, *The Statistical Account of Scotland. Drawn up from the Communications of the Ministers of the Different Parishes*, 21 Vols (Edinburgh, 1791-1799), xi. 23; W. Barrett, *The History and Antiquities of the City of Bristol* (Bristol, 1789), 508.

⁵⁰ R. Burns, *The Works of Robert Burns: with an Account of his Life, and a Criticism on his Writings*, 4 Vols (Liverpool, 1800), ii. 280.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 280-281.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 281.

was represented as a philanthropic and benevolent action, facilitating private improvement as well as enabling a community to improve one another. In a plan for a reading society for medical students, Thomas Pole spoke of its purposes of 'general utility', 'inquiry' and 'debate', suggesting that 'public reading is the most effectual means for spreading useful knowledge among a large number of men'.⁵³ The knowledge functions of reading associations come to the fore in these texts, perhaps reflecting the non-fiction genre of the sources themselves; conversely, fictional sources highlighted the leisure and social functions of reading associations, which matched their own genre's concerns.

However, the politeness and intellectual nature of reading associations was not universally acknowledged. Ten of the fictional hits in this search were various editions of 'The Country Book Club', a popular poem by Charles Shillito. Shillito remarked that the members of the club 'taste the sweets of lit'rature - and *wine*'.⁵⁴ The 'motley members of the Book-club' are said to arrive 'slow, in literary pride', depicted as pompous and pretentious.⁵⁵ The battle of the books is realised in a literal fashion, as 'swift as artill'ry balls, huge volumes fly'.⁵⁶ In the end, Shillito summarised that the book club was 'meeting to dispute, to fight, to plead; to smoke, to drink - do anything but read'.⁵⁷ This portrait firmly contradicts the polite impression of reading associations. Even when associations were reading, this was not always portrayed as wholesome: Thomas Gisborne argued that 'the mind is secretly corrupted' by the 'indiscriminate and insatiable avidity' with which book club members read.⁵⁸ In a later edition of his work, he expanded upon this, arguing that 'sufficiently strict' regulations could provide for 'pleasure and instruction' in clubs, but that they were 'contaminated by publications breathing the contagion of folly and vice'.⁵⁹ He argued that the principle of group circulation of all texts meant that problematic works 'obtrude themselves on those who would not have fought for them', suggesting that the purchasing suggestions of untoward members were inflicted upon and thereby infected the community.⁶⁰ Gisborne conceived of the club's community as a threat to individual purity.

⁵³ T. Pole, *A Syllabus of a Course of Lectures on the Theory and Practice of Midwifery* (London, 1797), xxviii-xxix.

⁵⁴ C. Shillito, *The Country Book-Club. A Poem* (London, 1788), 15.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵⁸ T. Gisborne, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, Second edn (London, 1797), 217.

⁵⁹ T. Gisborne, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, Third edn (London, 1798), 229.

⁶⁰ Gisborne, *Enquiry*, Third edn, 229.

Others argued that corrupting political influences within the community posed a threat: Charles Whitfield feared that a 'cunning individual' could corrupt a reading society to 'become a mere collection of tables, of superstition, or of romance'.⁶¹ It was even argued that the illuminati had disseminated their doctrines through reading societies.⁶² One source noted that a book club member 'abused his authority' in ordering books which other members 'cannot understand'.⁶³ The critics of reading associations were thus concerned that the community was vulnerable to infiltration or exploitation by dangerous individuals. The text of *The Trial of Thomas Muir* included an anecdote about how he had asked a member of a reading society to show some radical pamphlets to the other members, epitomising fears about the exploitation of such institutions.⁶⁴ These dangers of community corruption contrast with the presumed 'politeness' of Georgian club sociability. Certainly, these associations could not rely on a public perception of their politeness, and instead had to deliberately construct a reputation for politeness, if this was their aim.

The cultural image of reading associations that was created in this sample of contemporary literature includes the dominant historiographical representation of polite sociability, linked to local governance, courtship and refinement. Knowledge and improvement were also touted as important advantages of reading associations. However, these positive representations were undercut by the critiques such as the popular Shillito poem, which depicted a raucous, country gathering that weakly emulated real politeness. Another strand of contemporary literature argued that reading associations were actually dangerous, being vulnerable to the corruptions of bad reading material and dangerous radicals. Certainly, the social function of reading associations was a central theme which was debated in various types of literature, reflecting the contested ideas of sociability in this period.⁶⁵ Discussions of reading communities contended ideas of morality and propriety, which was seen as inherent in the reading matter itself, as well as being supplemented, for good or ill, by the community in which it was read.

⁶¹ C. Whitfield, *The Obligations to Mental Improvement Stated, and the Use of Books Recommended, especially to Youth* (Newcastle, 1792), 18.

⁶² *New Lights on Jacobinism, abstracted from Professor Robinson's History of Free Masonry* (Birmingham, 1798), 36-37.

⁶³ *The Country Spectator*, No. 24 (Gainsborough, 1793), 195.

⁶⁴ T. Muir, *The Trial of Thomas Muir, Esq., younger of Huntershill* (Edinburgh, 1793), 36.

⁶⁵ G. Russell and C. Tuite, 'Introducing Romantic Sociability' in G. Russell and C. Tuite (eds), *Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain, 1770-1840* (Cambridge, 2002), 9 argues that sociability was 'heavily contested' in the 'cultural politics of the 1790s'.

III. Self-Presentation of Associations

Another way to examine the values of reading associations is to consider the associations' own publications. Allan's analysis of subscription library purposes draws upon the discourse of three institutions: the Sunderland Subscription Library, the Peterborough Gentleman's Society, and the Liverpool Library.⁶⁶ He may cite such a limited source base because he instead generates an impressionistic sense of associations' principles through his lengthy analysis of their organisation and operations. St Clair uses four library labels and the stated purposes of three institutions (which are garnered from secondary sources rather than the associations' publications) to prove that their 'aims were grand and defiantly non-commercial'.⁶⁷ Here, I will consider twenty reading association sources which expressly stated their values, in rules and in printed prose, in order to analyse recurrent themes and dominant discourses about associations, in a much larger sample.⁶⁸ These documents were selected to provide a spread across the period from 1760-1833, as well as geographical variety across England and Scotland.

To move beyond the impressionistic sense of what reading associations said, to a more tangible indication of their common ideas and expressions, I have counted the most regularly recurring concepts of associational purposes, advantages, or their conceptions of knowledge. For any given source, I tallied every idea that they expressed from this list: for example, the Halifax Circulating Library proposal mentioned intellectual improvement, financial advantages and the quality of books. This shows the currency and visibility of

⁶⁶ Allan, *Nation*, 107.

⁶⁷ St Clair, *Nation*, 248-249.

⁶⁸ These sources are: WYAS, MISC:5/96C/79 Proposals for Establishing a Circulating Library in Halifax; DCRO, D/X/1355/1 Westgate Library; LBAS, MS2571/4/1/1 Original Freeth Invitations; *Liverpool* (1760); *Peterborough* (1783); *London* (1785); *Manchester* (1794); *Dalkeith* (1798); *An Address to the Subscribers to the Library at Hull, at the opening of the new rooms, on the first of July, 1801* (Hull, 1801); *Ayr* (1802); *Poole* (1806); Library in Moseley-Street, Manchester, in *The Monthly Magazine; Or, British Register*, Vol. XXI Part I for 1806 (London, 1806), 205-206; *Chichester Library Society* (1806); Caledonian Literary Society, in *The Monthly Magazine; Or, British Register*, Vol. XXI Part I for 1806 (London, 1806), 292-293; *A Letter from the Chairman Explaining the Founding of the Library. With Rules*. (Reading, 1807); *Exeter* (1808); J. Crosse, *An Account of the Rise and Progress of the Subscription Library at Kingston-upon-Hull* (Hull, 1810); *Kilmarnock* (1811); *Ludlow* (1823); J. Herschel, *An Address to the Subscribers to the Windsor and Eton Public Library and Reading-Room* (London, 1833).

certain associational principles across a range of sources, presenting an aggregate contemporary impression as to their purpose.

3.3 Key Ideas within Associational Literature

Idea	Number of sources in which mentioned (of 20)
Purpose	
Intellectual improvement, acquisition of knowledge	17
Amusement, pleasure, happiness	12
Sociability, politeness	8
Religion, morality	4
Advantages of associations	
Financial savings	12
Ethical and philanthropic achievements	9
Quality of books	6
Public benefits	6
Town benefits	5
Posterity	4
Friendship	2
Conception of Knowledge	
Useful	10
Religious/moral	8
General knowledge	6
Practical	2

Table 3.3 shows that the idea of intellectual improvement and knowledge was the most common trope in this discourse, and, significantly, amusement and pleasure were more dominant themes than sociability. Interaction of friends was not a commonly mentioned advantage of associations either; the discourse seems to focus on non-sociable principles, perhaps because sociability was seen as a concomitant benefit rather than something that was deliberately facilitated. When explaining the advantages of belonging to an association, financial benefits were most often stressed, although the ethical and philanthropic effects of

associations were also strongly emphasised. The knowledge that they aimed to encourage was most frequently described as useful, but also had inflections of religion, morality, or virtue, as well as general knowledge or wisdom. Technical or professional expertise was not a feature of their rhetoric, and professional works were sometimes expressly prohibited.⁶⁹

Reading associations' pursuit of intellectual improvement epitomises the key enlightenment concept of the betterment and perfectibility of mankind.⁷⁰ Dena Goodman argued that 'Enlightenment epistemology embedded the pursuit of knowledge in the social world': by this definition, reading associations seem to be a natural outgrowth of an enlightened desire to acquire knowledge.⁷¹ Reading associations were thought to be nodes in the diffusion of knowledge, which was a recurrent metaphor. John Crosse said that libraries had 'contributed most materially to that diffusion of science, literature and general knowledge'.⁷² In 1806, a Correspondent of the *Monthly Magazine* suggested that 'of all the means of disseminating knowledge, none perhaps is more generally useful than the establishment of Book Societies'.⁷³ Contemporaries regularly ascribed this important, developmental function to associations, portraying them as hubs of knowledge.

Whilst knowledge for its own sake was clearly valuable, it was often modified by reference to its application or utility. This was perhaps due to a continued reorientation of study to avoid the accusations of pedantry which were levelled at gentleman scholars of the seventeenth century.⁷⁴ Usefulness was often cited: Ludlow Library's books were 'useful', the Liverpool Library stated that reading led to 'many kinds of useful and polite Knowledge', and the Hull Library president's address ominously warned that 'there is something of vice in the indulgence of our taste for literature without an useful object'.⁷⁵ Knowledge was something to be enacted: associations sought 'the application of that knowledge to useful and profitable purposes'.⁷⁶ The president also stated that 'an increase of knowledge, with more enlightened

⁶⁹ See pages 58 and 148-149.

⁷⁰ J. Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760* (Cambridge, 2005), 8; N. Hampson, *The Enlightenment* (Harmondsworth, 1968), 88.

⁷¹ D. Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (London, 1994), 8.

⁷² Crosse, *Account*, 1.

⁷³ *The Monthly Magazine; or, British Register Vol. XXII Part II for 1806* (London, 1806), 665.

⁷⁴ S. Shapin, "'A Scholar and a Gentleman": the Problematic Identity of the Scientific Practitioner in Early Modern England', *History of Science*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (1991), 279-327.

⁷⁵ *Ludlow* (1823), 1; also in *Whitby* (1814), iv; *Liverpool* (1764), 3; *Address to the Subscribers to the Library at Hull*, 13.

⁷⁶ *Address to the Subscribers to the Library at Hull*, 10.

notions...will necessarily influence the affairs of this town'.⁷⁷ Reading was not a self-contained pursuit of knowledge, but necessarily impacted upon behaviour and society, as knowledge was to be performed as well as absorbed.⁷⁸ This was also consistent with the broader spectrum of learned associations, which Clark argues were focused on 'the practical utility of their ideas', although the examples he gives are specialised agricultural and medical societies.⁷⁹ The relationship between reading and action was most strongly expressed by the Hull Subscription Library, which particularly emphasised the connection between 'industry and study' and 'commerce and literature'.⁸⁰

One historian has argued that reading associations, particularly subscription libraries, were 'primarily for information and improvement rather than recreation and entertainment', contrasting the light reading of circulating libraries.⁸¹ Others have recognised that subscription library readers 'were reading for a mix of entertainment and improvement reasons', but the interrelationship between these two positions has not been sufficiently acknowledged.⁸² Utility seems to have been intertwined with the idea of enjoyment: it was in enacting knowledge that readers experienced pleasure.⁸³ Often, both features were mentioned simultaneously. The Manchester Circulating Library's collection was described as 'generally agreeable and useful',⁸⁴ and the London Library was for those 'who seek in reading a pleasing and instructive employment'.⁸⁵ A sub-group within the Greenock Library formed the Greenock Foreign Library in 1807, and the minutes summarised that 'views both of pleasure and of profit' had created this demand for foreign books.⁸⁶ This idea was epitomised in the Chichester Library Society's aim of 'rational amusement', which seems to

⁷⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁷⁸ This reflects the thrust of Jardine and Grafton's argument that early modern scholarly reading was 'goal-orientated - an active, rather than a passive pursuit', in L. Jardine and A. Grafton, "'Studied for Action": How Gabriel Harvey Read his Livy', *Past and Present*, Vol. 129. No. 1 (Nov., 1990), 30. Their study was focused on an amanuensis employed by an Elizabethan earl; my examples show the active principles of courtly scholarship were now common amongst everyday readers with modern texts.

⁷⁹ Clark, *Clubs*, 112-116.

⁸⁰ *Address to the Subscribers to the Library at Hull*, 3, 15.

⁸¹ K. A. Manley, 'Subscription and Circulating Libraries', in S. Brown and W. McDougall (eds), *The Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland. Volume 2: Enlightenment and Expansion 1707-1800* (Edinburgh, 2011), 338.

⁸² V. Dunstan, 'Reading Habits in Scotland circa 1750-1820', Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2010, 101.

⁸³ *Address to the Subscribers to the Library at Hull*, 10.

⁸⁴ *Manchester* (1794), 2.

⁸⁵ *London* (1785).

⁸⁶ WLA, WA1/1/2/1 Greenock Foreign Library Minute Book 1807-1828, 1-3.

have been a keynote phrase.⁸⁷ The relationship of reading and learning to enjoyment was also evident in contemporary accounts of reading: one reader wrote in his diary that ‘unless Books engross part of my day, existence is no satisfaction’, but also berated himself for ‘trifling my days away’ with idle rather than improving reading.⁸⁸ Pleasure and intellectual improvement were thus intertwined experiences of the eighteenth century reader, and reading association member: a member of the Poole Book Society wrote to the *Monthly Magazine*, describing his association as a ‘connection with which I have derived much pleasure as well as profit’.⁸⁹

Another ‘useful’ outcome of reading associations was their philanthropic effects. Whilst it was often argued that associations were beneficial, some associations specifically constructed themselves as charitable endeavours. Hull Subscription Library was vaunted for the learning it instilled in the minds of the young.⁹⁰ The Exeter Library for Young Persons similarly spoke of ‘diffusing knowledge’ which was ‘an auxiliary of moral and religious principles’.⁹¹ The Windsor and Eton Public Library went furthest in this aim, by constructing a separate, cheaper section for general subscribers, separated from the more ‘luxurious’ newspapers and periodicals.⁹² Their president elaborated upon the ‘harmless gratification’ that reading offered, promoting wholesome family sociability in place of drunkenness.⁹³ In these institutions, the relationship between enjoyment and instruction was more deliberate: lower-class readers were to be attracted by the entertainment value of books, but would then be subtly improved and educated by them. The Windsor and Eton Public Library’s President explained ‘if then we would generate a taste for reading, we must, as our only chance of success, begin by pleasing’.⁹⁴ Reading was seen to address a range of problems, both personal and societal; associations were thereby institutions which promoted the ‘public good’ through their far-reaching effects. This combined with references to their enhancement of their local town, or ‘public’ benefits, to construct associations as agents for social improvement.⁹⁵

⁸⁷ *Chichester Library Society* (1806), 676; see also *A Letter from the Chairman*, 1.

⁸⁸ *Diaries of William Johnston Temple, 1780-1796*, ed. L. Bettany (Oxford, 1929), 14, 52.

⁸⁹ *The Monthly Magazine; or, British Register Vol. XXII Part II for 1806* (London, 1806), 665.

⁹⁰ Crosse, *Account*, 4.

⁹¹ *Exeter* (1808), 3.

⁹² Herschel, *Address*, 13.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 18, 20.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁹⁵ See chapter six.

Religious purposes were not often cited, aside from in a small number of dedicated religious reading societies. The Westgate Library in County Durham announced that reading was ‘for increasing in heavenly wisdom, holiness, and present and future happiness’, even linking religious improvement with pleasure.⁹⁶ The Kilmarnock Library, which was not expressly religious, and in fact included ministers from a variety of Christian denominations, thought that reading ‘by enlarging our ideas, tends to guard us, in the great business of Religion, against superstition on the one hand, and enthusiasm on the other’.⁹⁷ This effect of exposure to more ideas was similarly hailed in Hull Subscription Library, whose president argued that reading would make them ‘grow ashamed of our prejudices’.⁹⁸ Moral effects were also noted by the London Library, which sought to prevent the ‘deprivation of morals’ by ‘indiscriminate reading’; here touting the regulatory function of the reading association, as a source of guidance and structure which facilitated healthy reading practices.⁹⁹ The moral effect of increased knowledge is more marked than any suggestion of religious engagement through reading; again focusing on outwardly-manifested moral behaviour rather than religious spirituality.

Table 3.3 shows that polite sociability was not as prominent a feature of associations’ stated purposes as the historiography would suggest. The interpersonal advantages of associating are most clear in the Peterborough Society for the Promotion of Friendship and Literature’s chosen nomenclature.¹⁰⁰ Reading’s effect on sociability was mentioned by the Kilmarnock Library, as it ‘furnishes entertaining subjects for conversation, [and] enhances the pleasure of the social hour’.¹⁰¹ At Dalkeith Subscription Library, books were thought necessary ‘to polish the manners’.¹⁰² Beyond these allusions to conversational improvement, sociability was most clearly expressed through a different type of printed source: invitations to the annual dinner of the Birmingham Book Society. The most notable feature of the invitations was their reference to food and dining, including ‘the sociable cup’ and ‘good English fare’,¹⁰³ and reading itself was described as ‘a constant food for the mind’, and a

⁹⁶ DCRO, D/X/1355/1 Westgate Library, 10.

⁹⁷ *Kilmarnock* (1811), 1.

⁹⁸ *Address to the Subscribers to the Library at Hull*, 9.

⁹⁹ *London* (1785).

¹⁰⁰ *Peterborough* (1783).

¹⁰¹ *Kilmarnock* (1811), 1.

¹⁰² *Dalkeith* (1798).

¹⁰³ LBAS, MS2571/4/1/1, 1800; LBAS, MS2571/4/1/1, 1799.

'keen craving'.¹⁰⁴ In this setting, conviviality and companionship were also important, with references to 'good fellowship', and their intention to 'make merry the heart'.¹⁰⁵ These invitations in fact took the form of poems, which perhaps accounts for their more vivid description of reading association practices. They show the convivial underbelly of associations, expressing ideas which were excluded from formal declarations of purpose in society rules or catalogues. Perhaps, then, sociability was a supplement to the more worthy purposes of reading associations. It was not expressly advertised in the way that ideas of intellectual improvement or wider social benefits were, but it was clearly an established and appealing feature of reading associations.

Finally, there is a degree to which reading association purposes and advantages were left unspoken, and instead their benefits were presumed and expected. It was seen as fairly obvious that joining together provided benefits for all: even as early as the foundation of the Liverpool Library in 1760, it was said that 'the Prospect of Advantage is obvious and extensive'.¹⁰⁶ A proposal for the founding of Halifax Circulating Library in 1768 stated that 'the Utility of a Scheme... needs not be much insisted upon'.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, the desire to read was taken for granted. The proposal suggested their scheme should work well in the neighbourhood, where 'the Number of Readers, ('tis presumed,) cannot be small'.¹⁰⁸ This repeated assumption that reading associations were inherently and undeniably advantageous shows the cultural permeation of ideas about the improving effects of reading.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, associations were naturalised as an ideal way for people to share the benefits of these laudable activities, showing the belief in the strength of the collectivity. Associational practice was underpinned by the credo that: 'what could not be effected by private individuals, may with facility be procured by the joint efforts of a Society'.¹¹⁰ The actions and effects of reading associations were summarised by John Herschel as being 'in

¹⁰⁴ LBAS, MS2571/4/1/1, 1799; LBAS, MS2571/4/1/1, 1795.

¹⁰⁵ LBAS, MS2571/4/1/1, 1802.

¹⁰⁶ *Liverpool* (1760), 3. See also *Manchester* (1794), 3; Herschel, *Address*, 6.

¹⁰⁷ CAC, MISC:5/96C/79 Proposals for Establishing a Circulating Library in Halifax, 1.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰⁹ This discourse is also present in newspapers: the Hereford Journal reported upon the establishment of the Ross New Reading Society, noting that 'the privileges of enjoying easy and cheap access to every valuable publication...is too obvious and too great to require elucidation', in *Hereford Journal*, Aug. 30, 1809, Issue 2045. Likewise, the proposal for the Wiltshire and Salisbury Library and Reading Society was followed by the comment that 'it is needless to point out the great importance of such establishments, as the advantages must be apparent to every reflecting mind', in *The Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, Oct. 18, 1819, Issue 4293.

¹¹⁰ *Kilmarnock* (1811), 1.

pursuance of individual and local advantages' as well as having a 'general end'.¹¹¹ Reading associations exemplified a philosophy whereby individuals' actions were nested within the local and the general community: improvement of the self brought about improvement of the collectivity.

To complement the prose materials by which associations announced their values, this chapter will now turn to a selection of associational bookplates from the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera. These book labels are more commonly used to analyse circulating libraries, as part of the study of trade cards and advertising, despite the existence of over one hundred associational labels.¹¹² The exact date of each bookplate is not known, but I have focused on those which appear to represent associations within the 1760-1830 period. Such printed material gives a wide geographical spectrum across England and Scotland, but is subject to haphazard survival. It also privileges the more wealthy and long-lasting associations which invested in such apparatus, although there are examples of book societies and book clubs within the selection. In fact, the Beccles Book Society and the Battle Book Club labels, whilst basic in their patterns, have been hand-illustrated, showing a desire to ornament the books even in small societies.¹¹³

The most basic function of book labels was to give the name of the institution, marking the association's ownership of the book. If this information was supplemented, this was most often by giving the date of the association's foundation. St Clair concludes that the labels express 'the year when serious modern reading reached their town', but does not examine them further.¹¹⁴ As these are labels that were pasted into the library's books, they sometimes specify loan periods or give reminders of the association's rules. 18 labels, around one-sixth of the associational examples within the collection, also include decorative images, which convey an impression of the society and its purposes. The associations were presumably selecting from a stock of images available from their local printer, which constrained their self-representation. Nonetheless, the types of image that they chose to

¹¹¹ Herschel, *Address*, 10.

¹¹² For example in C. A. Stewart-Murphy, *A History of British Circulating Libraries: The Book Labels and Ephemera of the Papantonio Collection* (Newtown, PA, 1990).

¹¹³ BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 6 (68), Circulating Libraries Box 6 (94a).

¹¹⁴ St Clair, *Nation*, 247.

include on their labels illuminate key ideas about reading associations: study, classical learning, and civic identity.

There are only two bookplates which are adorned with images which primarily suggest sociability. The label of the Masham Book Society, established 1814, centres around two hands, which appear to be clasped in a handshake.¹¹⁵ The Penzance Library label portrays a library scene, in which a cluster of people are talking, alongside a seated woman who is being handed a book by a man.¹¹⁶ This is redolent of circulating-library sociability within the library room, although books are the prime focus of the conversations here. The absence of sociable imagery across this sample ties with the limited reference to it in the prose sources: it cannot be said that associations projected a 'seductive Addisonian account of sociability' in their prose or artistic representations, in order to advertise for members.¹¹⁷

Far from a sociable image, the Manchester Subscription Library bookplate shows an empty room, save for a single table with a lone book lying atop it.¹¹⁸ This cavernous space presents the library as a cathedral, defined by seriousness and reverence rather than conversation. Images of books and scholarly items on other labels emphasise their studious purposes. The Ovingham Book Society label simply shows a table, quill, book and a scroll with the society's name on it, depicting a scholarly reading experience.¹¹⁹ The Wigan Subscription Library and Liverpool Library labels present more sophisticated and intimidating scenes: ornate, busy bookshelves with a gothic flourish.¹²⁰ Overall, quills appear in four of the labels, conjuring an impression of studious reading practice. These serious representations of reading societies occur more frequently than the conversational or fraternal images.

Alongside piles of books, the Stourbridge Library label depicts musical instruments, a globe, and a quill, showing a rounded, classical perception of learning.¹²¹ The shield, helmet and spear which have been laid down in the bottom-left corner could suggest that the central, reading figure is the goddess of Wisdom, Minerva.¹²² Such lofty classicism is clear in the

¹¹⁵ BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 7 (62).

¹¹⁶ BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 2 (29).

¹¹⁷ Allan, *Nation*, 13.

¹¹⁸ BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 5 (39a).

¹¹⁹ BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 6 (4).

¹²⁰ BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 5 (10), Circulating Libraries Box 5 (12).

¹²¹ BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 7 (33).

¹²² See J. Bell, *Bell's New Pantheon; or, Historical Dictionary of the Gods, Demi-Gods, Heroes, and Fabulous Personages of Antiquity*, 2 Vols (London, 1790), ii. 80.

Liverpool Library's label, where the figure of Minerva stands atop a pedestal announcing 'Pit Street Library Liverpool'.¹²³ Minerva is handing a book to a man, representing the library members' receipt of wisdom through reading. In fact, the Stourbridge and Liverpool labels use the same background image of bookshelves, a column, drapes and a distant cupola, hinting at a shared culture of classical emulation, as well as indicating the limitations of available imagery. A Greek inscription at the top of the Worcester Library label, which also depicts a female figure, announces: 'out of the heavens WISDOM'.¹²⁴ The Latin inscription on the wall of the Stourbridge Library label is a similarly intellectual reference, apparently representing the collective voice of the association's members: 'I judge this delight to be the most honourable of hobbies'.¹²⁵ An alternative historical analogy is given by the pharaonic death-mask depicted at the top of the Wolverhampton Library label.¹²⁶ Historicising their reading associations as continuations of classical modes of scholarship may explain why the advantages of reading associations were described in written sources as 'obvious', as they drew on traditional representations of scholarly knowledge and classical wisdom. These institutions used a series of classical symbols and mythical significations of wisdom to elevate their own reading, making reading association membership part of the pursuit of intellectual status.

The final idea embodied by these reading association labels is civic identity. Five labels employed their local coat of arms: the Chester Public Library, the Southport Public Library, the Boston Permanent Library, the Worcester Library, and the Ripon Library.¹²⁷ These institutions do not proclaim themselves to be town libraries, in the sense of bequests to the town by a benefactor such as Chetham's Library in Manchester, but rather seem to be ordinary proprietary associations that aligned themselves with the town's civic identity. The Chester and Southport labels are highly decorated with heavy, garlanded frames, whereas the Ripon and Boston libraries employ the town coat of arms as their sole image. The Worcester Library includes the coat of arms at the feet of their female figure, thus intertwining their motif of civic localism with grand classicism. There is also a banner at the bottom, with

¹²³ BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 5 (16).

¹²⁴ BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 7 (42). Thanks to Tim Ford for this translation.

¹²⁵ Thanks to Sophie Edelsten for this translation.

¹²⁶ BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 6 (62).

¹²⁷ BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 2 (22a), Circulating Libraries Box 5 (9), Circulating Libraries Box 5 (64), Circulating Libraries Box 7 (42), Circulating Libraries Box 7 (65).

'floreat' written on it, which seems to abbreviate the Worcester coat of arms' fuller inscription of 'floreat semper fidelis civitas' (let the faithful city ever flourish).¹²⁸ The iconography of these associations focuses on their locality rather than their reading practice.

These book labels provide a small but unique glimpse into the visual modes of representation which associations employed. In the same way that written discourse drew upon a range of key concepts which had social traction with the wider reading public of this period, these book labels reduced reading to a handful of the most powerful cultural images of the day. There are some clear trends visible amongst the associations: their dependence on classical figures; the use of local symbols including town coats of arms; and depictions of scholarly reading practices. This repertoire of images consistently evokes elite and gentlemanly connotations. Whilst their written discourse focused on worthy knowledge and improvements, their visual representations were more bold and ambitious in claiming gentlemanly status.

IV. Reading Associations in Newspapers: Self-Presentation and Representation

This section will use newspapers as evidence of reading associations' values, as well as external perceptions of them: a middle-ground between their self-presentation and external representations. Cumulatively, these newspapers provide a repository of information and ideas that literate locals would be exposed to. This analysis will examine the way that associations portrayed the sociability of their meetings, the intellectual effects that they were thought to have, and the way they claimed status as literary gentlemen, legitimated by the attention of the reading public.

The growing importance of later eighteenth-century provincial newspapers, and the newspaper industry as a whole, has been well established. Hannah Barker estimates that

¹²⁸ 'Worcester (England)', on Heraldry of the World, <http://www.ngw.nl> [18 May 2015].

fifty provincial newspapers were selling 2,000 copies per week in the 1780s, equating to 500,000 readers, or eight percent of the non-London population.¹²⁹ Christine Ferdinand gives a more conservative estimate in her study of *The Salisbury Journal*, suggesting that five percent of the local population may have been journal readers.¹³⁰ Newspapers' ephemeral nature and local focus provided intimate portraits of local institutions, and how associations were perceived. To my knowledge, newspapers have not been systematically examined by reading association historians before, so this also adds a new dimension to our understanding of how they engaged with and were perceived by their local society.

This research was conducted using the *British Newspapers* database, using five data sets which together encompass 41,749,893 documents.¹³¹ This is based on full runs of 48 selected national and provincial newspapers, providing a representative sample of British newspapers in this period through images of two million pages.¹³² I searched for key terms such as book club/society, reading club/society, subscription library and library society, prior to 1 January 1830. I ignored records which did not refer to voluntary, non-commercial reading associations, and filtered out extraneous search results, such as charitable book *distribution* societies, or societies in Reading (Berkshire), rather than reading societies. I excluded references to associations that were not in England or Scotland.

3.4 Newspaper Search Results Divided by Category

Sample Size	Meetings	Information	Incidental References	General Editorial	Finance	Theatre	Other
475	206	98	53	26	53	19	20
Percentage of total (0 decimal places)	43	21	11	5	11	4	4

¹²⁹ H. Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society, 1695-1855* (Harlow, 2000), 115.

¹³⁰ C. Y. Ferdinand, *Benjamin Collins and the Provincial Newspaper Trade in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1997), 131.

¹³¹ The datasets are: 17th and 18th Century Burney Collection, 19th Century British Newspapers Part One, 19th Century British Newspapers Part Two, British Newspapers Part Three 1780-1950, and British Newspapers Part Four 1780-1950. Quote from 'British Newspapers 1600-1950', <http://gdc.gale.com/products/19th-century-british-library-newspapers-part-i-and-part-ii> [13 May 2015].

¹³² Ibid.

Table 3.4 shows the distribution of hits across these search terms. If an article appeared in multiple newspapers, I counted each one as a separate ‘hit’, as each instance of publication contributed to the volume of information being purveyed about reading associations. In all, 119 separate institutions feature in this table (see Map 4), meaning they had an average of four separate ‘hits’ or articles which mentioned them. This can give a sense of the prevalent terminology at the time, in the eyes of readers: ‘Subscription Library’ was found most often, and ‘Reading Club’ the least.¹³³ The near-equivalent numbers of subscription library and book club references suggest that, just because subscription libraries were usually more formal civic institutions, possibly with premises, this did not mean that they had greater cultural visibility within newspapers. Seemingly informal ‘book clubs’ were as involved with local print culture as their more institutionalised counterparts.

I have categorised each search result by its content and style. Most frequent were reports of specific reading association meetings. Sixteen accounts of the Kendal Book Club’s annual dinners were found in *The Lancaster Gazette* and *The Westmorland Gazette*, and these give a sense of the ongoing messages that the local community was given about the reading association. These were exceptionally opulent occasions: their original venison feast was supplemented in the 1820s by gifts of locally grown grapes, and ‘turtle, grouse, good wines, and fruit of all descriptions’.¹³⁴ Indeed, *The Westmorland Gazette* frowned upon the fact that the *The Leeds Independent* had purportedly referred to the institution as the ‘Venison Book Club’, showing that they perceived its purposes to prioritise the convivial over the serious.¹³⁵ A bystander’s response was recorded in 1818, when the window of a carriage conveying people to the ball was broken by a stone ‘thrown by some malicious person in the street’.¹³⁶ This discourse which touted the exclusivity and superiority of reading associations obviously began to wear on the locals, generating resentment rather than emulative improvement.

Other reading associations summarised their annual dinners in a less overbearing fashion, but still conveyed the lofty values and behaviours that they sought to embody. The

¹³³ ‘Subscription Library’ 132 hits, ‘Book Club’ 126 hits, ‘Book Society’ 92 hits, ‘Library Society’ 74 hits, ‘Reading Society’ 43 hits, ‘Reading Club’ 8 hits.

¹³⁴ *The Westmorland Gazette*, Sept. 22, 1821, Issue 175; *The Westmorland Gazette*, Aug. 31, 1822, Issue 230.

¹³⁵ *The Westmorland Gazette*, Jan. 17, 1824, Issue 291.

¹³⁶ *The Westmorland Gazette*, Aug. 29, 1818, Issue 15.

reports of two Wells Book Club anniversary dinners described an 'elegant dinner' and 'loyal toasts', followed by speech 'abounding with classical allusions', and a speech 'replete with humour'.¹³⁷ This portrayed a polite meeting of local patriots, endowed with learning but also sociability. The next year, their meeting benefited from 'the captivating and classical eloquence of the Rev R. Odell, by the energetic and argumentative appeals of the Rev. Dr. Langton' and 'by the sprightly wit and acute reflections of the several other gentlemen'.¹³⁸ The Wells Book Club deliberately emphasised the range of conversational aptitudes they displayed, including erudition, disputation, and conversational wit. Certainly, sociability and pleasure featured highly in these accounts of meetings, debunking the idea of reading associations as serious or heavy-minded: the Preston Catholic Book Society spent their evening in 'mirth, and festivity', and the Eynsham Reading Society in 'social enjoyment... gratified with their entertainment'.¹³⁹ Reports of annual dinners touted polite sociability, as well as less polite versions of conviviality and fun.

The second most common type of newspaper reference to reading associations was informative articles. Announcements of newly-established associations explained and justified their activities, in order to attract subscribers. The Salisbury and Wiltshire Library and Reading Society announced that their object was 'to promote Literary intercourse' through a reference library, newspapers, and circulating books.¹⁴⁰ The news of the founding of associations also prompted editorial comment on their values. The Reading Society of Southmolton aimed to acquire books of 'merit' on 'general subjects', and *The North Devon Journal* thus opined that 'much intellectual improvement may be expected to result'.¹⁴¹ The Hampshire Library Society's advertisement was supplemented by an editorial piece which thought that it would 'prove a feature of equal attraction and utility'.¹⁴² The *Hereford Journal* announced that a new permanent library would provide 'amusement and improvement' at a 'cheap rate'.¹⁴³ This mingled intellectual purposes with pleasure, which was also shown to be the case within the associations' own discourse. Associations were advertised to these subscribers by touting key discourses of amusement and improvement.

¹³⁷ *The Norfolk Chronicle and Norwich Gazette*, Apr. 15, 1820, Issue 1615.

¹³⁸ *The Norfolk Chronicle and Norwich Gazette*, Apr. 14, 1821, Issue 2665.

¹³⁹ *Liverpool Mercury*, Jan. 28, 1825, Issue 714; *Berkshire Chronicle*, Dec. 19, 1829, Issue 254.

¹⁴⁰ *The Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, Oct. 18, 1819, Issue 4293.

¹⁴¹ *The North Devon Journal*, Dec. 31, 1824, Issue 27.

¹⁴² *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle*, Sept. 3, 1804, Issue 256.

¹⁴³ *Hereford Journal*, Dec. 7, 1814, Issue 2229.

Articles relating to reading associations consistently described their members in socially elevated terms. The founders of the Lincoln Subscription Library were ‘the principal noblemen and gentlemen’;¹⁴⁴ the Edinburgh Subscription Library contained ‘the most respectable citizens in the place’;¹⁴⁵ the Kendal Book Club dinner was attended by ‘most of the principal gentry’;¹⁴⁶ and the Wells Book Society was patronised by ‘gentlemen of the first character and distinction’.¹⁴⁷ The repeated assertions of relative social importance corroborates Henry French’s study, which argued that parish elites used the terminology of ‘chief inhabitants’ to denote their relative prominence in their community.¹⁴⁸ The Oakham Book Society pompously announced that it ‘has to boast of inrolling [sic] amongst its present members two Earls, Knights of the Garter, two Members of Parliament, eight Clergymen, and seventeen Gentlemen’.¹⁴⁹ More generally, subscribers were described in print as ‘gentlemen’, showing that participation in a reading association allowed members to claim to be honourable and virtuous citizens.¹⁵⁰ This language was also used in private documents: William Holland described Mr Matthew of his book club as ‘a quick sensible intelligent gentlemanlike man’; this last adjective suggesting behavioural rather than hereditary gentility.¹⁵¹ In his diary, James Oakes described book club members as ‘gentlemen’, as did John Marsh.¹⁵² This indiscriminating assertion of the gentlemanly status of all members was at least partly founded upon their shared pursuit of intellectual sociability, which was the lynchpin of their self-representation.

In addition to characterising their participants as social elites, associational advertisements expressly depicted their commonality as people who were passionate about reading. A notice of the establishment of the Oakham Book Society appealed to the ‘friends of literature’, and similar terminology was employed by the Dalkeith Subscription Library in its

¹⁴⁴ *The Scots Magazine and Edinburgh Literary Miscellany*, Jan. 1, 1809, 47.

¹⁴⁵ *The Scots Magazine and Edinburgh Literary Miscellany*, July 1, 1814, 489.

¹⁴⁶ *The Westmorland Gazette*, Aug. 29, 1818, Issue 15.

¹⁴⁷ *The Norfolk Chronicle and Norwich Gazette*, Apr. 14, 1821, Issue 2665.

¹⁴⁸ French, “Ingenious & Learned Gentlemen”, 48.

¹⁴⁹ *The Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford mercury*, Sept. 14, 1810, Issue 4147.

¹⁵⁰ *World*, Mar. 30, 1789, Issue 702; *The Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford mercury*, Feb. 7, 1794, Issue 3283; *The Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, May 11, 1804, Issue 3816; *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle*, Sept. 3, 1804, Issue 256; *The Yorkshire Gazette*, Apr. 10, 1824, Issue 260.

¹⁵¹ *Paupers and Pig Killers: The Diary of William Holland, A Somerset Parson 1799-1818*, ed. J. Ayres (Gloucester, 1984), 25.

¹⁵² *The Oakes Diaries: Business, Politics and the Family in Bury St Edmunds 1778-1827*, ed. J. Fiske, 2 Vols (Woodbridge, 1990-1991), i. 268; *The John Marsh Journals: The Life and Times of a Gentleman Composer (1752-1828) Volume II*, ed. B. Robins (Hillsdale, 2013), 136, 139, 228.

rules, which proclaimed that 'Friends to literary information' had founded the society.¹⁵³ The Halifax Circulating Library proposal was addressed to 'lovers of reading', and the London Library Society likewise placed newspaper advertisements which referred to 'lovers of learning'.¹⁵⁴ Privately, an invitation to members of a Bristolian book society referred to themselves as 'friends to Knowledge'.¹⁵⁵ Thus associational members were portrayed as being united by sentimental ties, as 'friends' and 'lovers' of books. They were not a hereditary strata of gentlemen, but it was their enthusiastic pursuit of knowledge, and their sentimental connection with literature, which gave them social distinction and a collective identity.

Associations also disseminated information in newspapers, employing them as a mechanism to communicate with society members. The Stamford Subscription Library published a list of missing books, and the Aberdeen Reading Society recalled its books in order to compile a new catalogue.¹⁵⁶ Conducting business in such a public fashion may also have been a deliberate attempt to harness an audience for the conspicuous participation of associational members. Advertisements tauntingly emphasised the exclusivity of associational occasions:

On the Tenth Day of May, being the Anniversary of the Horncastle Book Club, a Dinner will be provided at the Queen's Head Inn for the Members of the Society, and they are at Liberty to introduce any of their Friends, upon giving previous notice.¹⁵⁷

When reviewing meetings, newspapers often emphasised their exclusivity: the Ipswich Book Club jubilee dinner was 'very select' even though 'each Gentleman had the option of introducing a friend to the company'.¹⁵⁸ This clearly suggests that reading association members were using local newspapers to advertise their activities to the public, generating individual status as gentlemen, and collective status as the chief inhabitants of their communities.

This contradictory promotion of associations' exclusivity through a generally accessible newspaper seems to have caused confusion, or perhaps resentment, about their ambiguously public state. In Ipswich, the book society's annual auction was interrupted by a

¹⁵³ *The Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, Sept. 14, 1810, Issue 4147; *Dalkeith* (1798), 3.

¹⁵⁴ WYAS, MISC:5/96C/79 Proposals for Establishing a Circulating Library in Halifax; *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, July 7, 1788, Issue 5978.

¹⁵⁵ BOD, MS. Eng. misc. c. 36 Cottle's book club poem.

¹⁵⁶ *The Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, Jan. 15, 1808, Issue 4008; *The Aberdeen Journal*, Feb. 13, 1828, Issue 4179.

¹⁵⁷ *The Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, May 6, 1803, Issue 3763.

¹⁵⁸ *The Ipswich Journal*, Oct. 9, 1813, Issue 4177.

person 'peeping in at the window', who then 'abruptly entered the room', before being ejected.¹⁵⁹ Associations' use of newspapers complicated societal understandings of what they stood for, and why they associated. Despite their constitutional arrangements which parcelled out shares in written knowledge as private property, they engaged with print culture to make their activities public knowledge. Similarly, they declared themselves 'opened to all Ranks of People, without Distinction of Age, Sex, or Profession'.¹⁶⁰ Yet, this invitation to all ranks was extended by 'several Ladies and Gentlemen' of the Lincoln Subscription Library.¹⁶¹ Associational participation thus elevated all the people which joined it; its members claimed gentlemanly status, at least partly justified by their associational behaviour rather than through breeding.

These 475 references to reading associations within a range of local newspapers give an insight into the types of information that newspaper readers would have encountered about reading associations. The majority of references were to association meetings, depicting them as sociable, and usually convivial, occasions. Newspapers recognised the associations' intellectual purposes, but often portrayed this, in the context of their meetings and notices, as 'literary intercourse' amongst fellow 'lovers of reading'. The association's unity was emphasised by social descriptors which sought to portray reading association members as a local, enlightened elite, often moving beyond assertions of respectability to statements of local superiority.

V. Conclusion

This chapter has reassessed the discourse of and about reading associations, suggesting that they should not simply be viewed as institutions of polite sociability. Their

¹⁵⁹ *The Ipswich Journal*, Mar. 6, 1802, Issue 3601. In retribution, the intruder reported the person who was conducting the auction to the local magistrates for holding an auction without a license.

¹⁶⁰ *The Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, Aug. 18, 1786, Issue 2892.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

politeness was contested in contemporary print culture, and sociability did not feature highly as a verbal or visual representation employed by reading associations. Newspaper accounts of dinners show that conviviality was certainly enjoyed by association members; but associations themselves did not foreground this sociability as their prime form of personal improvement.

Politeness is also a concept which should be applied to reading associations with caution by historians. Kathleen Wilson suggests that artisan culture ‘tended to eschew the polite culture of assemblies’ in favour of the “‘rational” pursuits of book clubs’.¹⁶² Yet Mark Towsey describes the novels and histories of Wigtown Subscription Library as pointing towards ‘polite, leisured readers’, focusing on their recreational reading in an implied contrast to purposeful, intellectual pursuits.¹⁶³ There is a tendency within historical writing to use the idea of politeness as a shorthand for social activities and the pursuit of respectability, with this attention to form carrying undertones of posturing and emulation. Were reading associations ‘rational’ or ‘polite’, if these are indeed opposites? What did politeness mean, with regards to intellectual culture?

Lawrence Klein suggests that ‘polite knowledge’ was used to define ‘artistic endeavors’ as opposed to ‘scientific inquiry’: drawing an epistemological distinction roughly congruent with the arts-sciences distinction of modern times.¹⁶⁴ However, later eighteenth-century science itself has been described as ‘polite knowledge’ and ‘rational entertainment’, reducing the utility of this disciplinary distinction.¹⁶⁵ Arnold Thackray, examining the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society, suggests that this was ‘ornamental’ science as a ‘mode of cultural self-expression’ by the new elite.¹⁶⁶ This scientific learned society seems to have shared similar aims and had similar socio-cultural purposes to the reading associations investigated here. Klein also suggests that polite learning was defined against useful learning, hinging on the distinction between leisure and productivity: thus it was not

¹⁶² K. Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge, 1995), 62.

¹⁶³ M. R. M. Towsey, ‘First Steps in Associational Reading: Book Use and Sociability at the Wigtown Subscription Library, 1795-9’, *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, Vol. 103, No. 4 (Dec., 2009), 470.

¹⁶⁴ L. E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1994), 5.

¹⁶⁵ A. Thackray, ‘Natural Knowledge in Cultural Context: The Manchester Mode’, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 79, No. 3 (Jun., 1974), 690.

¹⁶⁶ Thackray, ‘Natural Knowledge’, 678.

simply the content of the books, but their intended application which affected their polite connotations.¹⁶⁷ However, this simple dichotomy between leisure and productivity, or from another angle, of entertainment and serious improvement, is not a plausible way to analyse historical reading experiences.¹⁶⁸ The foregoing analysis of societies' expressions of their twinned reading purposes of pleasure and instruction indicate that contemporaries did not draw such clear distinctions. They certainly conceived of their reading as purposeful, citing the 'uses' and outcomes it would offer; but this was not inconsistent with pleasure and entertainment.

Finally, Klein suggests that polite knowledge was genteel because it had a 'generalist' purview, and was the province of the amateur rather than the pedantic professional: it is thus the absence of specialism or expertise which justifies the title of 'polite' knowledge.¹⁶⁹ Although Rebecca Bowd has claimed that subscription libraries promoted 'specialization and expertise',¹⁷⁰ the analysis of eclectic reading interests presented in chapters one and two, followed by the interest in broad learning presented in this chapter, suggest that reading associations were committed to a generalist stance. Some associations even went so far as to prohibit professional or specialist literature, confirming this aversion to pedantry or technicality. Reading associations were thus 'polite' in their broad range of interests, but were not simply reading for leisure or recreation. They believed there was a utility to their reading, and were storing up various forms of improvement. Politeness, in its contemporary usage by historians, does not adequately capture the range of their interests and purposes.

Increased knowledge was the form of improvement most often touted by reading associations. Whilst this was to be useful and thus purposeful, it was not technical or professional, and is thereby distinct from the 'Useful Knowledge' campaigns of the early nineteenth century. The associations' emphasis on general knowledge allowed them to unite

¹⁶⁷ L. E. Klein, 'Politeness for Plebes. Consumption and Social Identity in Early Eighteenth-Century England', in A. Bermingham and J. Brewer (eds), *The Consumption of Culture 1600-1800: Image, Object, Text* (London, 1997), 366.

¹⁶⁸ E.g. M. Cohen, "'A Proper Exercise for the Mind": Conversation and Education in the Long Eighteenth Century', in K. Halsey and J. Slinn (eds), *The Concept and Practice of Conversation in the Long Eighteenth Century, 1688-1848* (Newcastle, 2008), 104.

¹⁶⁹ Klein, *Shaftesbury*, 5; L. Klein, 'Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Dec., 2002), 876.

¹⁷⁰ R. Bowd, 'Useful Knowledge or Polite Learning? A Reappraisal of Approaches to Subscription Library History', *Library and Information History*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Sept., 2013), 182. Bowd's argument about the professional and technical expertise of the Leeds Medical Library and the Foreign Circulating Library actually serves to emphasise the general purview of the Leeds Library.

literate people across disciplinary and occupational boundaries. This constructed a non-professional realm of knowledge, emphasising the virtue of the amateur, and the accessibility of self-improvement. This is consistent with Clark's argument that improvement featured in the activities and principles across the spectrum of associational types in this period.¹⁷¹ It is through this improvement that claims for virtue and status could be made, which were general and universal, rather than birth-, class- or occupation-specific. The primacy of knowledge within associational discourse, and the members' subsequent claims to gentility, suggests that intellect should be considered as a component of status-creation in this period. If 'intellectualism, or dedication to cultivating the powers of the mind' was a tenet of the Enlightenment, then reading associations show that such enlightened sentiments were widespread.¹⁷²

This research parallels other studies which highlight the middle-class appropriation of print as a tool of status creation, for example through the writing and consumption of town histories which purveyed civic ideals.¹⁷³ Reading associations were part of this process by which middling sorts claimed authority through contribution to, and consumption of, print culture, which endowed them with knowledge and a reputation for energetic, virtuous self-improvement. Associations' arguments that knowledge was made pleasurable through its application reiterated general injunctions for knowledge to be shared and circulated, rather than hoarded by individuals.¹⁷⁴ Other intellectual interest groups such as antiquaries emphasised the public good that their private research could achieve, and built their claims upon the idea of study as 'a collaborative project'.¹⁷⁵ Through intellectual endeavours such as antiquarianism or reading associations, scholarship was now firmly connected with the pursuit of individual, familial and community improvement, rather than being the preserve of courtly or humanist scholars who applied their intellect to the advancement of the state.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷¹ Clark, *Clubs*, 85, 178.

¹⁷² R. B. Sher, *The Enlightenment & the Book: Scottish Authors and their Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Ireland and America* (London, 2006), 16-17.

¹⁷³ R. Sweet, *The Writing of Urban Histories in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1997), 15, 238, 283.

¹⁷⁴ D. R. Woolf, *Reading History in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2000), 80; D. Woolf, 'Speaking of History: Conversations about the Past in Restoration and Eighteenth-Century England', in A. Fox, and D. Woolf (eds), *The Spoken Word: Oral Culture in Britain, 1500-1850* (Manchester, 2002), 124; Sweet, *Antiquaries*, 93.

¹⁷⁵ Sweet, *Antiquaries*, 81.

¹⁷⁶ e.g. Jardine and Grafton, "Studied for Action", 30-78.

Reading associations thus included aspects of the broader contours of associational culture explicated by Clark: they emphasised practical utility, catered to leisure tastes and acted as a form of public sociability.¹⁷⁷ Rather than being philanthropic or leisure associations, reading associations seem to best fit within the category of learned societies. James McClellan argued that one 'subset' of learned institutions, scientific societies, laid 'special claims to knowledge and expertise'.¹⁷⁸ Other learned associations, such as economic, agricultural and medical societies, had specific technical and technological aims, and coalesced around professional interests.¹⁷⁹ Clearly, reading associations claimed neither occupational specificity nor expert knowledge; rather, their purview was general knowledge, which could be variously constructed as useful, virtuous and learned. However, this chapter has argued that the prime use of this generalist self-improvement through reading was in the enhancement of prestige and status. Another difference, which will be further examined in chapter five, was that reading associations admitted women, whereas most other associations did not.¹⁸⁰ Reading associations, in portraying their members as not only gentlemen but ladies, thus enabled both genders to claim genteel status through intellectual pursuits, making them uniquely accessible amongst the spectrum of learned associations.¹⁸¹ Various contemporary poems about reading associations refer to their 'noble plan', 'noblest task' and 'noblest motives'; might these not be deliberate puns on the status-implications as well as the moral goodness of these associations?¹⁸²

Returning to the original question of why people participated in reading associations, it seems clear that intellectual improvement was central to associational purposes. They built upon the idea of collective strength, and embodied a vision of knowledge which made individual readers influential within a range of social frameworks. They spoke of improving and serving their locality, and bolstered members' claims to cultural and civic authority over

¹⁷⁷ Clark, *Clubs*, 112, 123, 140.

¹⁷⁸ J. E. McClellan, *Science Reorganized: Scientific Societies in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1985), 3, 26.

¹⁷⁹ McClellan, *Science Reorganized*, 38; Clark, *Clubs*, 114-115.

¹⁸⁰ Clark, *Clubs*, 3, 191, 198-201.

¹⁸¹ References to reading association ladies include *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle*, Sept. 3, 1804, Issue 256; *The Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, Nov. 19, 1819, Issue 4626; *The Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, Aug. 18, 1786, Issue 2892; *The Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, May 11, 1804, Issue 3816.

¹⁸² 'A Song, when the author was librarian to the Dalkeith Subscription Library', in P. Forbes, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Edinburgh, 1812), 149; T. Crichton, 'The Library', in Leonard (ed.), *Radical Renfrew: Poetry from the French Revolution to the First World War* (Edinburgh, 1990), 53; 'The Library', in Forbes, *Poems*, 10.

their community. However, it must be acknowledged that individuals could pick from a kaleidoscopic range of intersecting motivations, which changed over time, which would be impossible for the historian to recover. For this reason, it is important to recognise less programmatic but nonetheless significant ideas which associations facilitated: timeless human desires for conviviality, feasting and pleasure. Through associations, these literate middling sorts became learned, developing a sense of commonality which was predicated on their virtuous application of knowledge, for individual and collective improvement. The sociability of the community consolidated this alliance of literate, cultured elites within local societies. The mechanisms by which community was created and maintained will be examined in the next chapter.

Chapter Four

Community and Conflict

I. Introduction

This chapter will examine reading associations as a microcosm of contemporary understandings of what it meant to be in a community, providing an insight into broader ideas about belonging and society in this period. Associations are an ideal unit of analysis, for they were premised on the voluntary, constitutional creation of an 'association' by its own members, rather than being a community which was formed by outside influence such as governmental or ecclesiastical units. Upon what principles was this community constructed, and how was it held together? Peter Borsay argued that eighteenth-century clubs 'cultivated an atmosphere of neutrality', as part of a broader urban shift in which 'civility and sociability replaced the divisive aspects of politics and religion'.¹ Peter Clark agrees that they were 'a neutral arena' facilitating 'harmony and friendship'.² Recent articles on book clubs have developed new arguments about the ways that their members interacted. David Allan suggested that associations were based on an Addisonian model of club life, and aimed to 'serve as meeting places' after the tumult of the previous century.³ He gives examples of the intermingling of Unitarians, Anglicans, and Methodists at the Leeds Library; and of Anglicans, Quakers and Catholics in Lancaster.⁴ He suggests that subscription libraries 'try to avoid

¹ P. Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660-1770* (Oxford, 1989), 281-282.

² P. Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford, 2000), 180, 195.

³ D. Allan, 'Politeness and the Politics of Culture: An Intellectual History of the Eighteenth-Century Subscription Library', *Library and Information History*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Sept., 2013), 166.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

party-political rivalries and religious disputes', and Keith Manley similarly argues that libraries 'generally observed' rules against controversial religion or politics.⁵ However, Manley suggests that, despite their good intentions, subscription libraries were mired in 'contention and censorship'.⁶ To mediate between these two portrayals of peaceful associational aims and divided associational realities, this chapter will investigate the principles that held the community together, and the mechanisms by which they achieved their purported harmony.

After considering the prevailing ideas which underpinned the internal operations of these communities, this chapter will then analyse their attitude towards external politics. The period from 1760 to 1830 was an era of popular politicization, catalysed by the American crisis and the French Revolution.⁷ High-profile political movements based on associations developed in the 1780s Yorkshire Association Movement, and in the 1790s loyalist associations.⁸ Clubs in general are often asserted to have been instrumental in developing political culture and identities amongst the urban bourgeoisie.⁹ Joanna Innes names book clubs as one of the sites of 'politicized sociability' in the 1810s, and Emma Griffin argues that working-class autobiographers recounted that their participation in reading groups was an important entry-point into political activism.¹⁰ How did reading associations relate to politics, in terms of their reading matter, their community construction, and their social effects? Was political awareness and self-consciousness a deliberate aim or outcome of their sociability? Finally, what does their construction of community and their negotiation of politics tell us about their social function, in relation to models of the public sphere, of civil society and of class formation?

⁵ Allan, 'Politeness', 165; K. A. Manley, 'Jeremy Bentham has been Banned: Contention and Censorship in Private Subscription Libraries before 1825', *Library and Information History*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Sept., 2013), 173.

⁶ Manley, 'Bentham', 170-181.

⁷ F. O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons, and Parties: The Unreformed Electoral System of Hanoverian England 1734-1832* (Oxford, 1991), 295-297.

⁸ P. Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727-1783* (Oxford, 1989), 548; M. Philp, 'Talking about Democracy: Britain in the 1790s', in J. Innes and M. Philp (eds), *Re-imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions: America, France, Britain, Ireland 1750-1850* (Oxford, 2013), 110; B. Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, & Dangerous People?: England 1783-1846* (Oxford, 2006), 69-70.

⁹ K. Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge, 1995), 11; R. J. Morris, 'Voluntary Societies and British Urban Elites, 1780-1850: An Analysis', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Mar., 1983), 95-118.

¹⁰ J. Innes, 'People and Power in British Politics to 1850', in Innes and Philp, *Re-imagining Democracy*, 145-146; E. Griffin, 'The Making of the Chartists: Popular Politics and Working-Class Autobiography in Early Victorian Britain', *English Historical Review*, Vol. CXXIX, No. 538 (June, 2014), 578-605.

II. Community Construction

Reading associations delineated admissions procedures in order to codify the membership of an inherently voluntary community. This section examines the manuscript and printed rules of 50 reading associations, between 1755 and 1834.¹¹ The historian who has paid most attention to the intricate details of reading associations, Allan, noted that their rules and practices embodied the ‘formal principle of procedural equality between all the participants’, and ‘full democratic control over decision-making’.¹² He described balloting, minute-taking and elections as ‘the conventional paraphernalia of Georgian associational organisation’.¹³ However, his tone when discussing the ‘conspicuous’ contributions that fines made to society funds, suggests that this was the main function of the complex rules.¹⁴ William St Clair is even bolder, in asserting that fines were ‘part of an array of instruments which ensured exclusivity of access’.¹⁵ Whilst fines were an important part of society proceedings, this research suggests that rules sought to display constitutional principles, vesting the society with meaningful representative power, as well as regulating behaviour.

Reading associations, particularly subscription libraries, often sold shares which were seen as legal property, and in two associations in this sample the shares were completely transferable, with no further regulation by the association.¹⁶ However, the majority of

¹¹ These records are: LPL, MS 1694 Wye Book Club Papers. Rules and Accounts 1755-1766; *Liverpool* (1760); ACL, 027.441 Air Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776-1830, and Ayr (1802); CAC, WPR/59/2 Sedbergh Book Club; *Peterborough* (1783); *London* (1785); *Leeds* (1785); *Halifax* (1786); DCRO, D/X/1355/1 Westgate Library; BOD, G. A. Warw b.1 (777) *Articles established for the Government of a Book Society in the City of Coventry*; *Bristol* (1790); *Kelso* (1790); HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library Laws; *Cornwall* (1792), and R. Polwhele, *The Language, Literature, and Literary Characters, of Cornwall: with Illustrations from Devonshire* (London, 1806), 102-105; LPL, MS 3167 Bennett Commonplace Book 1792; *Lewes* (1793); *Huntingdon* (1793); *Manchester* (1794); HL, MS 5/27 Wigtown Subscription Library; *Macclesfield* (1796); *York Book Society* (1797); BMC, AA/DC/180/1 Kilmarnock Public Library Minutes 1797-1823; *Dalkeith* (1798); *London* (1800); CAC, WPR/59/1A Kendal Book Club Rules; *Paisley* (1802); BA, FZ/17 Union Book Club Memorandum Book; *Poole* (1806); *Broome Street* (1806); *Scarborough* (1806); *Ipswich* (1806); *Chichester Book Society* (1806); *Chichester Library Society* (1806); *A Letter from the Chairman Explaining the Founding of the Library. With Rules.* (Reading, 1807); *Exeter* (1808); *Oxford* (1809); J. Crosse, *An Account of the Rise and Progress of the Subscription Library at Kingston-upon-Hull* (Hull, 1810); *Tavistock* (1810); *Glasgow* (1810); *Whitby* (1814); *Newton* (1814); *Edgbaston* (1816); *Dursley* (1818); *Select York* (1818); *Ludlow* (1823); *Edinburgh* (1823); WCRO, CR304 Shipston-upon-Stour Reading Society Rules 1828; *Dudley* (1826); BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 5 (78) Kettering Book Society; WCRO, CR0229/Box12/1 Miscellaneous Ettington Book Club Records.

¹² D. Allan, *A Nation of Readers: The Lending Library in Georgian England* (London, 2008), 41, 83.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45-46. See also 94.

¹⁵ W. St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge, 2004), 259.

¹⁶ DCRO, D/X/1355/1 Westgate Library, 10-11; *Glasgow* (1810), vii.

associations made stipulations about transfer proceedings in order to regulate who was admitted to the community. Some associations specified eligibility criteria which potential members had to meet, including living within a reasonable proximity, or subscribing to the laws. In six instances, nominations had to be brought forward by society members, thus allowing the community to control nominations.¹⁷ At Dalkeith Subscription Library, candidates' character had to be 'attested by two members of the Society'.¹⁸ A more vague motion of 'approval' had to be given in the Bolton Union Club, the Poole Society, the Ayr, Newton and Wallacetown Library, the Shipston-upon-Stour Reading Society, the Edinburgh Subscription Library and the Wigtown Library; presumably the ambiguity of this statement allowed for communities to regulate their membership based on nebulous feelings of friendship and suitability, without providing a clear code of practice. Twelve institutions made provision for visitors: the two forms of 'credit' needed by potential temporary subscribers were financial credit to guarantee the safety of the books they borrowed, and personal credit in terms of community contacts who would sponsor them.¹⁹ This legislation shows that the reading associations were not closed institutions which denied access to all; but they were carefully controlled communities, concerned with preserving their property.

Once credit and approval had been established, prospective candidates had to be voted into the society. The rules regarding the ballot varied between associations, with three in this sample insisting upon a unanimous decision;²⁰ ten suggesting the vote should be carried by a majority of two-thirds or more;²¹ and nine requiring a majority decision.²² Two of the associations specified fines for revealing how you had voted: at Kendal the penalty was two shillings and sixpence; the same offence in the Huntingdon Book Club cost a bottle of

¹⁷ LPL, MS 1694 Wye Book Club Papers, 2; *Lewes* (1793), 3; *Ipswich* (1806), 671; *Poole* (1806), 666; *Edgbaston* (1816), 3; *Dudley* (1826), iii.

¹⁸ *Dalkeith* (1798), 4.

¹⁹ *Leeds* (1785), 92; HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library Laws, 2; Polwhele, *Cornwall*, 103; *Huntingdon* (1793), 6; *Macclesfield* (1796), 37; Crosse, *Account*, Rules, 1; *Tavistock* (1810); *Whitby* (1814), 7; *Select York* (1818), ix; *Edinburgh* (1823), 11; *Ludlow* (1823), 12-13; *Dudley* (1826), viii.

²⁰ Unanimous: *Macclesfield* (1796), 34; CAC, WPR/59/1A Kendal Book Club Rules, 7; *Dursley* (1818), 5.

²¹ Two-thirds or more: *Lewes* (1793), 3; *Huntingdon* (1793), 3; *London* (1800), 7; *Select York* (1817), vii; *Edinburgh* (1823), 1; *Poole* (1806), 666; *Chichester Book Society* (1806), 674; *Chichester Library Society* (1806), 675; *A Letter from the Chairman*, 4; *Dursley* (1818), 5.

²² Majority: *Ayr* (1802), 3; CAC WPR/59/2 Sedbergh Book Club, 7; HL, MS 5/27 Wigtown Subscription Library, 3; *Edgbaston* (1816), 3; *Ipswich* (1806), 671; WCRO, CR304 Shipston-upon-Stour Reading Society Rules 1828; BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 5 (78b), 3; WCRO, CR0229/Box12/1 Miscellaneous Ettington Book Club Records, 4; *Dudley* (1826), iii.

wine.²³ Additionally, the Coventry Book Society felt it necessary to ordain that 'no Member... shall solicit the Vote of any other Member' in order to proscribe 'undue influence' and 'observe the utmost Delicacy and Respect in balloting'.²⁴ At Hull Subscription Library, anyone delivering a forged vote to the committee was to be expelled from the society forever.²⁵ Voting was seen as an important and serious privilege of the members.

Fourteen of the institutions in this sample stipulated that women must vote by proxy.²⁶ The fact that they were able to vote at all is significant and progressive, relative to their rights within broader society.²⁷ Furthermore, the very formulation of rules regarding voting by proxy endowed women with power: the proxies at the Broome Street Circulating Library in Manchester were to 'produce the necessary authority [from the lady] in writing'.²⁸ While to modern eyes the separate manner of voting may seem disadvantageous, relative to their power in other social organisations, women were given significant authority within reading associations, and in the republic that they imagined. The importance of women's involvement in reading associations will be further examined in chapter five, but here it is sufficient to note that they too were enfranchised citizens of the reading association.

Once elected, prospective candidates had to consent to be governed by the laws of the society. The Halifax Circulating Library stated that 'no person shall be considered as a member of this Society, or have any Share in the Library, who does not consent to be governed by these Laws, and subscribe them'.²⁹ Similar formulations stressing the consent to and governance of the associations' laws were included in the rules of twenty-two associations in this sample.³⁰ This reiterates the centrality of the law to middling people in

²³ CAC, WPR/59/1A Kendal Book Club Rules, 7; *Huntingdon* (1793), 4.

²⁴ BOD, G. A. Warw b.1 (777) *Articles established for the Government of a Book Society in the City of Coventry*.

²⁵ Crosse, *Account*, Rules, 4

²⁶ *Leeds* (1785), 93; *Paisley* (1802), 15; *Edinburgh* (1823), 4; *Halifax* (1786), 64; *York Book Society* (1797), 6; *Oxford* (1809), 4; *Ludlow* (1823), 6; *Tavistock* (1810); *Select York* (1823), x; *Broome Street* (1806), 669; *Ipswich* (1806), 672; Crosse, *Account*, 2; *Chichester Library Society* (1806), 678; *Dudley* (1826), ix.

²⁷ A. Vickery, 'Introduction', in A. Vickery (ed.), *Women, Privilege, and Power: British Politics, 1750 to the Present* (Stanford, 2001), 8 suggests that 'the weight of custom prevented the vast majority of eligible women from approaching the ballot'.

²⁸ *Broome Street* (1806), 669.

²⁹ *Halifax* (1786), 68.

³⁰ *Liverpool* (1760), 5; *Ayr* (1802), 14; *Leeds* (1785), 92; *Halifax* (1786), 68; *Bristol* (1790), 5; HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library Laws, 2; LPL, MS 3167 Bennett Commonplace Book 1792; *Manchester* (1794), 74; *Macclesfield* (1796), 37; *York Book Society* (1797), 6; *Dalkeith* (1798), 4; *Paisley* (1802), 4; *Ipswich* (1806), 672; *Exeter* (1808), 11; *Oxford* (1809), 3; Crosse, *Account*, Rules, 8; *Tavistock* (1810), n.p.; *Whitby* (1814), 7; *Newton* (1814), 4; *Ludlow* (1823), 6; *Edinburgh* (1823), 3; *Dudley* (1826), iii.

general, as it allowed them to defend their property and assert their involvement in society, and also affirms that civil society sponsored the idea of equality before the law.³¹ In five associations, new members were to sign their name to the rules, emphasising the contractual nature of community membership.³² Reciprocally, members were often provided with objects which symbolised their membership, including tickets and medals. Four institutions specified that library tickets would be signed by the president, embodying a physical as well as social contract between the member and their community.³³

As well as individuals consenting to be governed by the community's laws, the community was also accountable to them. At the half-yearly meetings in Tavistock Subscription Library, the treasurer was to 'produce his accounts and vouchers, to be examined by the members present'.³⁴ Similarly, in the Exeter Young Persons' Library 'every Subscriber may at any time have access to the Books of the Institution', and at Ayr Library 'The President, or any other Member, may examine the Librarian's accounts when they please'.³⁵ This legislation facilitated the accountability of the association's hierarchy to its members: in modern terms, it ensured institutional transparency. Nicholas Rogers suggested that the 'public accountability' of town improvement schemes and other voluntary bodies could function as a critique of the more corrupt and oligarchical practices of corporations.³⁶ Similarly, reading associations' clear paradigm of contractual obligations outlined the middling-sorts' political philosophy which encouraged the accountability of citizen to society, and vice versa. Morris suggests that associations increased in formality and visibility, through publications, accounts and meetings, between 1800 and 1850; conversely, this research

³¹ F. O'Gorman, *The Long Eighteenth Century: British Political and Social History 1688-1832* (London, 1997), 288-293; J. Barry, 'Introduction', in J. Barry and C. Brooks (eds), *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550-1800* (Basingstoke, 1994), 26; A. Black, *Guilds and Civil Society in European Political Thought from the Twelfth Century to the Present* (London, 1984), 40.

³² *Exeter* (1808), 11; BOD, G. A. Warw b.1 (777) *Articles established for the Government of a Book Society in the City of Coventry*; *Tavistock* (1810), n.p.; *Newton* (1814), 4; *Bristol* (1790), 8.

³³ *Ludlow* (1823), 3; *Oxford* (1809), 3; *York Book Society* (1797), 5; *Select York* (1818), viii.

³⁴ *Tavistock* (1810), n.p.

³⁵ *Exeter* (1808), 14; *Ayr* (1802), 13. See also *Lewes* (1793), 6.

³⁶ N. Rogers, 'The Middling Sort in Eighteenth-Century Politics', in Barry and Brooks, *Middling Sort*, 166.

shows that the trope of accountability through bureaucratic structures was actually in evidence from the mid-eighteenth century.³⁷

All members were believed to have 'an equal Right and Power in the Society', mentioned in various forms in nine sources.³⁸ They had 'equal privileges' in New Malton, their 'voices...be of equal weight' in Hull, and at Ludlow they had 'an equal share...in all the benefits and advantages'.³⁹ Despite a hierarchical system which meant that only two-guinea subscribers could be elected to the committee (although all could cast a vote), the Cornwall County Library rules argued that all 'ought to be on an equal foot' in terms of book circulation.⁴⁰ The Liverpool Library elaborated most eloquently upon this relationship between individual and community: 'that all the Subscribers equally contributing to the support of the Design, have originally an equal Right and Power in the Society; and that all Power is granted for the Good of the Whole, by their free choice'.⁴¹ By consenting to the laws of the association, individuals gained equal rights, benefit and powers. This contract was summarised as seeking the good of the whole, voluntarily submitting to the institution for collective benefits. This 'subscriber democracy', which has been touted as a new nineteenth-century form of association, was actually in existence in these early library societies.⁴²

Cumulatively, this research shows the contemporary belief in the rule of law, and a social contract by which individuals earned rights, benefits and responsibilities within a community. Eligibility for community membership was determined by inheritance or sale of shares, making property the basis of membership, but additionally depended upon more nebulous concepts of community approval, as well as objective characteristics such as distance from the society. The participation of women within this mini-commonwealth, and

³⁷ R. J. Morris, *Class, Sect and Party: The Making of the British Middle Class, Leeds 1820-1850* (Manchester, 1990), 168-169; R. J. Morris, 'Civil Society, Subscriber Democracies, and Parliamentary Government in Great Britain', in N. Bermeo and P. Nord (eds), *Civil Society Before Democracy: Lessons from Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Oxford, 2000), 115; R. J. Morris, 'Urban Associations in England and Scotland, 1750-1914: the Formation of the Middle Class or the Formation of a Civil Society?', in G. Morton, B. de Vries and R. J. Morris (eds), *Civil Society, Associations and Urban Places: Class, Nation, and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Aldershot, 2006), 145.

³⁸ *Halifax* (1784), 64; ACL, 027.441 Air Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776-1830, 11; HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library Laws, 1; *Paisley* (1802), 4; *Manchester*, (1794), 79; *Crosse, Account*, 2; *Liverpool* (1760), 6; *Ludlow* (1823), 3; *Ipswich* (1806), 672. Books were 'joint and equal property' at *Lewes* (1793), 5, as were those of *Chichester Library Society* (1806), 675.

³⁹ HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library Laws, 1; *Crosse, Account*, 2; *Ludlow* (1823), 3.

⁴⁰ Polwhele, *Cornwall*, 101.

⁴¹ *Liverpool* (1760), 6.

⁴² P. Nord, 'Introduction', in Morton, de Vries and Morris (eds), *Civil Society*, xxviii; Morris, 'Civil Society', 119.

the space awarded to visitors, honorary and charitable members, shows the flexible interpretation of who had access to the public, literary sphere, incorporating more than just propertied men. However, the most recurrent idea was that consenting to the laws was a condition of societal membership, literally defining the social contract by which individuals could participate in community activities.

The relationship between this construction of community and the ties which bound national society together is clear. Through their legislation for associations, middling people elaborated upon a contractual understanding of citizenship and social order. The practice in reading associations reflects the constitutional basis of associations more generally.⁴³ Clark describes elections, fines and deposits across a range of societies, and suggests that societies instituted complex laws in order to ensure their longevity.⁴⁴ However, he does not mention associational regulations which sought to enforce the members' equality and subservience to the rule of law, so perhaps such democratic injunctions were particular to reading associations. As an example, the Yorkshire Law Society rules stipulated admissions procedures and the need for members to subscribe to laws, although it did not specify the equality of all members in the way that reading associations did.⁴⁵ Margaret Jacob argues that freemasonry was 'the most avowedly constitutional and aggressively civic' of all of the sociable forums of the eighteenth century, although their ceremonies emphasised their internal hierarchy rather than their equality.⁴⁶

Reading associations were thus only one forum in which these constitutional principles of civil society were being articulated. However, they were also the most generally accessible of all of the aforementioned fora, neither limiting their community to a specific trade or religion, nor instituting the secrecy and hierarchy which characterised freemasonry. They are therefore a noteworthy expression of contemporary principles of community and social contract philosophy. Reading association practices also related most directly to conceptions of the literary public sphere (both in terms of contemporary addresses to the literary public, and modern sociological paradigms). Their incarnation of the literary public

⁴³ M. R. Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680-1780* (London, 1996), 105.

⁴⁴ Clark, *Clubs*, 219, 244.

⁴⁵ *At a General Meeting of the Yorkshire Law Society* (York, 1789).

⁴⁶ M. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Oxford, 1991), 15.

sphere was not universally accessible: criteria of financial and social credit provided barriers to access. To be in the literary public was to be propertied, as a 'proprietor' of a reading association. Furthermore, the literary public were not passive monitors of culture, or an amorphous and anonymous virtual republic, but rather a self-conscious community with codes of conduct and structures which regulated their practices.

III. Community Maintenance

A key element of the portrayal of reading associations within newspapers was their achievement of 'harmony'.⁴⁷ This was particularly emphasised by associations which intermingled different denominations. A speaker at the Preston Catholic Book Society dinner is said to have addressed 'my Protestant neighbours' who were also at the dinner, and reminded members that the society existed to help them appreciate the opinions of others.⁴⁸ Similarly, a newspaper remarked upon the establishment of a reading club in Nottinghamshire, noting that 'among the subscribers we observe the names of a Protestant Vicar of the Parish, and the Catholic Priest', showing that associations' ideas of community and impartiality were also remarked upon by others.⁴⁹ Reading associations were represented as transcending divisions between their members, as exemplars of sociability and civility.

The Eclectic Book Society's minute book shows a similar use of harmonious language, in a document which was for the internal use of the society. The resignation of the society's secretary, William White, in April 1813 prompted a grandiloquent speech, which they copied into their minutes. White advocated three main points: 'regularity, punctuality and

⁴⁷ *The Norfolk Chronicle and Norwich Gazette*, Apr. 15, 1820, Issue 1615; *The Newcastle Courant etc.*, Nov. 7, 1807, Issue 6839; *Caledonian Mercury*, Dec. 10, 1808, Issue 13571; *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, Dec. 8, 1827, Issue 3893; *The Westmorland Gazette*, Jan. 12, 1822, Issue 191.

⁴⁸ *Liverpool Mercury*, Jan. 28, 1825, Issue 714.

⁴⁹ *The North Devon Journal*, Oct. 25, 1827, Issue 174.

impartiality' which he asserted had caused the society to flourish in 'so much harmony, and beauty'.⁵⁰ White's principles of regularity and punctuality were said to give 'each part its proper place and situation', and he encouraged adherence to the rules of the society in order to prevent 'confusion and disorder'.⁵¹ The rule of law was of central importance, and had to be applied unswervingly, even to 'trivial affairs, minor circumstances'.⁵² White explained that, for the leader, 'impartiality is the most important of all' for 'in this Society we are all upon a level, here we are of no distinction'.⁵³ When Clement Hoare resigned as chairman later that year, he asked to be remembered for 'preserving, unimpaired, the rules, regulations and orders of the Eclectic Book Society' and it was indeed recognised that he had made 'unwearied exertions to establish and perpetuate good order'.⁵⁴ This reading association's members took pride in their principles of egalitarianism and orderly governance. Members were able and eager to ensure equal treatment within reading associations: the rule of law levelled social distinctions which might otherwise have secured deferential treatment for aristocrats or gentry. Rather than reflecting contemporary fears of democracy leading to the tyranny of the majority, these middling sorts seemed to valorise the values of equality and democratic decision-making through all members' participation.⁵⁵

Evidently, associations' discourse about harmony did not preclude incidences of discord. A letter to a Bristolian newspaper referred to a previous letter from 'An Old Member', which had complained that the library society allowed its committee to continually re-elect itself.⁵⁶ The respondent, styled 'A New Member' argued that this practice was permitted by the rules, and challenged the Old Member to raise his objections in an 'open manly way' at the meeting. Speaking at the meeting was conceived of as an appropriate way to cope with discord, whereas sniping letters were not. The face-to-face community of the reading association allowed it to resolve tensions 'publicly', contributing to the transparency of the community.

A prolix pamphlet about a controversy in the Huntingdon Book Club referred to the author's 'late Motion in favour of Regularity, Decency, and manly becoming Order among

⁵⁰ LMA, CLC/064/MS00988A The Eclectic Book Society Minute Book 1812-1820, 7.

⁵¹ Ibid., 8.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁵ J. Innes and M. Philp, 'Introduction', in Innes and Philp, *Re-imagining Democracy*, 3.

⁵⁶ *The Bristol Mercury*, Mar. 24, 1823, Issue 1722.

ourselves'.⁵⁷ Another publication clarified that the issue at question was the 'precipitate admission of the B. of L- (without Ballot)'.⁵⁸ This text again outlines a new philosophy of equality under the law, rather than admitting candidates based on their external prestige. However, the same pamphlet argued against balloting for books, as negative votes could be based on a dislike of the proposer, rather than an actual objection to the text. Instead, the author advocated that 'an open reason may be alledged [sic], why any Book is proper, or improper to be received'.⁵⁹ These twin principles of the rule of law and 'open' conduct between members epitomised the community values of these middling sorts. Furthermore, the civility of their conduct was labelled as masculine, emphasising that associational paradigms of behaviour subsumed female members into this masculine discourse.

Conflict within reading associations occasionally spawned its own publications, showing a desire to have the reading public arbitrate on perceived misdemeanours within the society. In *A Letter to Daniel Sykes*, Isaac Wilson laid out complaints against this barrister, who had launched a campaign to prevent long-standing committee members from continuing to serve in the Hull Subscription Library.⁶⁰ Allan has read this conflict as an expression of the fear of 'faction', while Manley believes it was a religious challenge, mounted because books by dissenters were not being purchased.⁶¹ My interpretation of this incident instead foregrounds ideas of internal law and equality which were thought to have been transgressed. Wilson complained about proceedings which had been 'directed in the spirit of party against the Committee'.⁶² One of Wilson's principal objections was that Sykes had interrogated him in the meeting, in the fashion 'of cross-examination in a witness box, instead of standing in that room upon an equal footing with yourself'.⁶³ Equality was central to Wilson's conceptualisation of the reading community, and he censured Sykes' breach of this principle. Furthermore, the reference to cross-interrogation could be a denunciation of Sykes' employment of his professional conduct, as a barrister, within a non-professional environment (as argued in chapter three). Interestingly, Wilson recounted Sykes' argument

⁵⁷ *By permission. Oratiuncula, habita Huntingdoniæ in coetu literario, XXIII Nov. MDCCLXXIII, by a once ejected senior member* (Huntingdon, 1774), 6.

⁵⁸ *To all Reading Members of the Book-Club, Huntingdon* (Huntingdon, 1776), 2.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶⁰ I. Wilson, *A Letter to Daniel Sykes, Esq. A. M. Barrister at Law, Respecting the Proceedings at the Meeting of the Subscribers to the Hull Subscription Library, in January 1812* (Hull, 1812).

⁶¹ Allan, 'Politeness', 166; Manley, 'Bentham', 175.

⁶² Wilson, *Sykes*, 7.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 4.

that the committee were 'sitting hugger mugger under a blanket', and passing decisions in secret.⁶⁴ Sykes' original complaint had thus built upon similar principles, namely the equality of all library members, whether committee or non-committee, and he had sought to challenge the secrecy and superiority with which committee business was conducted. The conflict within this reading association built upon variant interpretations of the central ideas of equality, law, and order.

These examples of conflict about members' equality and the dangers of an insubordinate committee prove an exception to Jonathan Barry's argument that some associations established hierarchies through initiation and seniority, and to Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's division of the respective positions of the lower-middle class as the 'rank-and-file' and the upper middle class as the leaders of associations.⁶⁵ Rather than reproducing 'the socio-economic inequalities within the bourgeoisie', reading associations razed these distinctions, to the point where even managerial structures were questioned.⁶⁶ Perhaps books were a more levelling and accessible common focus than those of other associations, and it was therefore harder for elites to argue for positions of authority, as they could in philanthropic projects which necessitated management experience and community standing. Barry argues that hierarchy within associations 'was justified organisationally (rather than on principle)'.⁶⁷ This is certainly true of reading associations, which evidently disapproved of the principle of hierarchy, and even struggled with the ideological implications of a managerial committee, despite its practical necessity.

Examples of conflict recorded in the societies' minute books are able to give a rounded picture of associational means of conflict resolution. In the Exeter Library Society in 1784, 'some doubts having arisen, respecting the legality of the last two committees', the minute book noted that 'all their orders be approved of and confirmed'.⁶⁸ This reflects other examples in which the conduct and governance of the committee were questioned by members. Here, the rule of law was used to announce that the law had been upheld. In the

⁶⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁵ J. Barry, 'Bourgeois Collectivism? Urban Association and the Middling Sort', in Barry and Brooks, *Middling Sort*, 100-101; L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (London, 1987), 24.

⁶⁶ Barry, 'Bourgeois Collectivism', 101.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 101.

⁶⁸ DA, Z19/41/1 Exeter Library Society Minutes 1777-1789, August 1784.

minute book of the Wigtown Subscription Library, new procedures for dealing with conflict were announced. 'If any member conceive himself aggrieved by any of the Office bearers of the library, he is to... require the treasurer to call a[n] official meeting'.⁶⁹ This change was initiated in place of the previous practice of 'querulous letters to the Treasurer or Librarian which the Society highly disapprove of'.⁷⁰ Many other associations made rules about how 'a member thinking himself aggrieved, may appeal to the society'.⁷¹ Individualistic forms of conflict resolution, including letters, pamphleteering or committee coups, were to be replaced by collective decisions through bureaucratic procedures. This enabled tensions to be resolved within the reading association, without scandal or malice. A letter to a newspaper regarding a controversy at the Rochford Book Club concluded by denigrating its opponents for 'introducing the private affairs of a Book Club into a public newspaper'.⁷² The rule of law meant that reading communities should be able to regulate their own affairs, helping to generate their reputation for harmony. Gentlemanly and honourable conduct was now defined by reference to this system of internal laws, which provided 'open manly' means of resolution, in contrast to a pusillanimous resort to anonymous letters. The apparatus of voluntary communities was not only an effective means of ensuring cohesion, but was represented as the honourable, regular and even-handed way to achieve it. Duels were no longer a respectable environment in which to settle conflicts; annual general meetings were.⁷³

This discussion of conflict within reading associations highlights that they were not unified class bodies which acted uniformly against external interests. The conflict depicted here centred on ideas of honourable and dishonourable behaviour amongst equals, reinforcing the conclusion of the previous chapter that status was at stake in these communities, rather than class interest. They were concerned to correct individuals within their system who failed to conform to their expectations, rather than seeking to proselytise their ideas to outsiders. Furthermore, this chapter has proven that existing accounts of the

⁶⁹ HL, MS 5/27 Wigtown Subscription Library, 39.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷¹ *London* (1785), 8. See also BA, FZ/17 Union Book Club Memorandum Book, 5; Crosse, *Account*, 7; *Tavistock* (1810), n.p.; *Whitby* (1814), 8; *Ludlow* (1823), 8; *Edinburgh* (1823), 9.

⁷² *The Chelmsford Chronicle*, Oct. 9, 1789, Issue 970.

⁷³ Langford, *Polite*, 587-590; D. T. Andrew, 'The Code of Honour and Its Critics: The Opposition to Duelling in England, 1700-1850', *Social History*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Oct., 1980), 409-434.

development of bureaucratic apparatus as a means of negotiating conflict are incorrect in dating this to the period 1820-1850: such principles operated within arenas of so-called polite sociability in the eighteenth century.⁷⁴

IV. Internal Partisanship and External Politics

This section will consider the role of politics and political language within reading associations, analysing whether politics was believed to rupture or unite a community. Generally, associations and clubs have been linked to the development of a feeling of 'social and political autonomy' amongst the people, and a belief that the government was accountable to them.⁷⁵ This plethora of associations created a 'new, artificial world of public space and public time'.⁷⁶ Associations took over the accessible, fraternal and discursive functions which were associated with later seventeenth-century coffeehouses, and were instrumental in the creation of political consciousness, social ties and provincial culture.⁷⁷ To what extent was their socio-political function, as portrayed in this paradigm of the bourgeois public sphere, a manifest and conscious part of their practices? This section of the thesis will challenge the received opinion that associations sought to programatically avoid divisive texts, and will reassess both the heterogeneity of opinions and backgrounds which members brought to the community, and the success of the association in uniting these individuals into a non-partisan community. This reflects on whether this was a party-political age which impinged upon the sociability and community of provincial individuals, or whether party allegiance was just one form of identity which was used and negotiated, in conjunction with other forms of interest.

⁷⁴ R. J. Morris, *Men, Women and Property in England, 1780-1870: a Social and Economic History of Family Strategies amongst the Leeds Middle Classes* (Cambridge, 2005), 66.

⁷⁵ J. Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge, 2001), 34.

⁷⁶ Clark, *Clubs*, 170.

⁷⁷ Wilson, *The Sense of the People*; Morris, *Class*.

There certainly were links between club culture and political movements during the long eighteenth century. Frank O’Gorman argues that the Wilkes campaign not only mobilized commercial culture in the production of ribbons, buttons and porcelain, but also appropriated the ‘culture of the middling orders’, as ‘many of the old clubs and lodges... were to be found supporting Wilkes’.⁷⁸ Through the 1790s, popular politics was often organised through clubs, such as the Society for Constitutional Information, the London Corresponding Society, and Church and King Clubs. O’Gorman calculated that, in six months of 1792, 2,000 local patriot clubs were instituted, in response to fears of radical reformism.⁷⁹ The club was a congenial environment for political affiliation and proselytisation. Yet while associations were linked to developing political culture in general, internally they are seen as having ‘papered over the divisions of sect or party’.⁸⁰ Turning to politics within reading associations in particular, Allan argued that they sought an Addisonian, ‘non-factional and non-partisan ethos’, but that inevitably tensions did occur.⁸¹ Nonetheless, he argues for their ‘sincere attempts to avoid religious and political disagreement’.⁸² Taking a more sceptical view, Manley argues that ‘battles’ between Tories and Whigs were ‘fought out at annual meetings’.⁸³

Associations often disavowed the existence of any internal politics: a poem about the Lewes Library Society concluded with the idea that, within this society, ‘Faction, and ev’ry meaner passion cease’.⁸⁴ The York Select Subscription Library advertised that it was not managed by ‘any particular Sect or Party’.⁸⁵ If party allegiances were noted, they were said to have been put aside within the association. The Kendal Book Club dinner was said to bring ‘men of opposite parties and opinions together twice a year... tending to soften and smooth away that party asperity’.⁸⁶ A letter to *The Country Spectator* noted that their town was ‘divided into almost as many parties as families’, which had all been ‘satisfied’ in the book society until a meddling curate ordered unsuitable books.⁸⁷ The existence of plural

⁷⁸ O’Gorman, *Long Eighteenth Century*, 225-226.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁸⁰ B. Lewis, *The Middlemost and the Milltowns: Bourgeois Culture and Politics in Early Industrial England* (Stanford, 2001), 6.

⁸¹ Allan, ‘Politeness’, 165-166. See also Allan, *Nation*, 37-38.

⁸² Allan, ‘Politeness’, 166.

⁸³ Manley, ‘Bentham’, 170.

⁸⁴ J. Button, *The Lewes Library Society; a Poem* (London, 1804), 22.

⁸⁵ *The Yorkshire Gazette*, Nov. 25, 1820, Issue 84.

⁸⁶ *The Westmorland Gazette*, Jan. 17, 1824, Issue 291.

⁸⁷ *The Country Spectator*, No. 24 (Gainsborough, 1793), 194-195.

interests and divisions thus reflected the perceived fragmentation of local society. Reading associations were not unique in their experience of discord, but rather epitomised the conflicting interest groups which defined local life. In fact, they were argued to be more successful at displacing those conflicting identities than was broader society.

How then did they deal with the subject of politics? Thomas Kelly argued that the number of clubs founded in the 1780s and 1790s was due to 'the political excitement engendered by the American and French wars, for periodicals and pamphlets formed a large part of the stock'.⁸⁸ However, the traditional interpretation of associations' holdings of these ephemeral political works has been questioned by Allan, who argued that few associations were dominated by such material.⁸⁹ Indeed, as previously noted, Manley and Allan suggest that outright legislation against political and religious works was used to prevent controversy in reading associations.⁹⁰ Robert Morris asserted that a growing number of clubs in the 1820s and 1830s had rules against religious and political works, and that a deeply divided social elite could only function together by employing 'no religion, no politics' rules.⁹¹

Within my sample of 50 associations, only two forbade political books, and another two expressed caution about their acquisition.⁹² Four institutions prohibited the acquisition of works of controversial divinity.⁹³ The Coventry Book Society was the only institution to express concern about political behaviour within institutions, forbidding the soliciting of votes, and unharmonious conversation.⁹⁴ It is therefore incorrect to state that associations orchestrated harmony by forbidding controversial topics of religion or politics. Indeed, the rules display other, more urgent concerns: six associations vowed to suppress immoral works, and the Bolton Union Club prohibited 'immodest conversation', along with swearing and laying wagers.⁹⁵ This chimes with the discourse examined in chapter two, whereby the associations ensured the propriety and regularity of members' reading practice. More

⁸⁸ T. Kelly, *Early Public Libraries: A History of Public Libraries in Great Britain before 1850* (London, 1966), 139.

⁸⁹ Allan, *Nation*, 51.

⁹⁰ Allan, 'Politeness', 165 and Allan, *Nation*, 108; Manley, 'Bentham', 173.

⁹¹ Morris, *Men*, 24; Morris, 'Civil Society', 124-125; Morris, 'Urban Associations', 149.

⁹² *Exeter* (1808), 11; WCRO, CR0229/Box12/1 Miscellaneous Ettington Book Club Records, 1; BMC, AA/DC/180/1 Kilmarnock Public Library Minutes 1797-1823, 10; *Ludlow* (1823), 8.

⁹³ DCRO, D/X/1355/1 Westgate Library, 11 specified the exclusion of works relating to the doctrine of particular redemption; *Macclesfield* (1796), 36; *Exeter* (1808), 11; *Select York* (1818), xi.

⁹⁴ BOD, G. A. Warw b.1 (777) *Articles established for the Government of a Book Society in the City of Coventry*.

⁹⁵ *Leeds* (1785), 96; DCRO, D/X/1355/1 Westgate Library, 11; *Exeter* (1808), 11; *Oxford* (1809), 5; Crosse, *Account*, 4; *Select York* (1818), xi; BA, FZ/17 Union Book Club Memorandum Book, 5.

important still was the prohibition of professional works by four associations,⁹⁶ with a further three associations exhorting that their books should be of 'general interest', 'general usefulness', and 'general use'.⁹⁷ Professional interest groups were thus the most visible form of sectarian interest which was confronted by reading associations, reiterating the argument from chapter three that associations sought to create a community which prioritised general knowledgeability over technical knowledge.

Minute books show the ongoing negotiations of community through their record of meetings. In the Dursley Reading Society, periodical subscriptions were contentious. In the period from 1821 to 1833, it was proposed that the society subscribe to 14 separate publications.⁹⁸ Furthermore, proposals to discontinue subscriptions were also brought forward, in some cases leading to a tug-of-war situation between proponents and opposers of certain periodicals. *Blackwood's Magazine* was the most controversial publication, being discontinued and then reinstated three times in the course of twelve years. At the same time as *Blackwood's* was discontinued, for example in 1821 and 1825, the *Edinburgh Review*, its Whiggish rival publication, was reordered.⁹⁹ The ongoing controversy over these intertwined publications must indicate a substantial interest in both publications and their respective Tory and Whig philosophies. Other political doctrines were also represented, including the liberal and nonconformist publication, *The Monthly Review*, as well as the ultra-Tory *Fraser's Magazine*, and the determinedly apolitical *New Monthly Magazine*.¹⁰⁰ Yet despite these clear sectarian divisions, the society held together. This problematises the idea of a harmonious reading community, and shows that their lack of rules against political factionalism did not mean that they were politically homogenous. Instead, the association was content to adhere to the views of the majority at any given time, and did not fear division over such topics.

Just how divided were the associations' members likely to be, in matters of local politics? I have used poll books to examine how individual association members voted in

⁹⁶ BMC, AA/DC/180/1 Kilmarlock Public Library Minutes 1797-1823, 10; *Paisley* (1802), 8; *Dursley* (1818), 1; WCRO, CR304 Shipston-upon-Stour Reading Society Rules 1828.

⁹⁷ *Edgbaston* (1816), 2; *Ludlow* (1823), 8; WCRO, CR0229/Box12/1 Miscellaneous Ettington Book Club Records, 1.

⁹⁸ BOD, MS. Top. Gloucestershire f.1 Dursley Reading Society Minutes 1821-34.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3, 8.

¹⁰⁰ G. Carnall, 'The Monthly Magazine', *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 5, No. 18 (Apr., 1954), 158; P. Leary, "'Fraser's Magazine' and the Literary Life, 1830-1847", *Victorian Periodicals Review*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Summer, 1994), 105; N. Sweet, 'The New Monthly Magazine and the Liberalism of the 1820s', *Prose Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2002), 147.

local elections.¹⁰¹ Of course, members will have voted for these candidates for a variety of reasons, not least personal connections or predilections. Rather than proving an outright 'political philosophy' or 'party spirit' which characterised associations, this research aims to ascertain the degree of unanimity or division within the associations' voting practices.

4.1 Hull Subscription Library voters in 1802/1806 Polls

Candidate	Votes in 1802 poll	Votes in 1806 poll
Samuel Thornton	46 of 52	36 of 42
William Joseph Denison	20 of 52	14 of 42
John Staniforth	18 of 52	22 of 42

The most useful poll-books in this study are those linked with Hull Subscription Library, for elections in 1802 and 1806 (see table 4.1). In all, 52 library members were found in the 1802 poll book, and 42 in the 1806 poll book.¹⁰² Each voter cast up to two votes in the poll, provided they were for different candidates. The table clearly shows that the majority of the library members who were polled in these elections voted for the tory candidate, Samuel Thornton. There is a remarkable degree of uniformity with only six members not casting a vote in his favour, both in 1802 and 1806. This is in contrast to the closeness of the election as shown by the overall votes in 1802, which Thornton won by 1,266 to Staniforth's 1,183.¹⁰³ There was much less uniformity in library members' voting practices regarding the other candidates, in both contests. This research shows that whilst there was a large degree of

¹⁰¹ Library members' names were corroborated by matching forenames and surnames with the poll-book entries, as well as checking any supplementary poll book occupation information against the Library's own records, information from the local directory and local archival databases. If there was more than one person with a given name in the poll book, this was not counted, as it is not clear which one was the library member. This method allows me to assume a good degree of accuracy in asserting that the names identified from the poll books were library members.

¹⁰² *A Copy of the Poll, (in alphabetical order), Taken at the Guild-Hall, in the Town of Kingston-upon-Hull, on Monday the 5th, and Tuesday the 6th Days of July, 1802, Before Thomas Osborne, Esq.* (Hull, 1802); *A Copy of the Poll, as taken at Kingston-upon-Hull on the 30th and 31st of October, 1806, for electing two burgesses to serve in parliament* (1806, Hull). From the library's printed records I have established a list of 289 members from 1776-89, meaning the members mentioned in the poll books account for around one-sixth of the total subscribers, although many of these were women who would not have had the opportunity to vote. Crosse, *Account*; HHC, UDSL/61 Catalogue of the Hull Subscription Library.

¹⁰³ J. M. Collinge, 'The History of Parliament: Kingston upon Hull', on History of Parliament Online, <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org> [26 June 2015].

consensus over Samuel Thornton, the library also bridged fairly disparate opinions on other candidates.

4.2 Exeter Library Voters in 1790 Poll

Candidate	Votes in 1790 poll
James Buller	29 of 30
John Baring	19 of 30
Sir Charles Bampfylde	5 of 30

I have also examined the Exeter poll book from 1790, following the methods outlined above (see table 4.2). 30 men identified from the 1776 and 1788 Exeter Library Society membership lists voted in the poll, casting up to two votes each.¹⁰⁴ Again, there was remarkably consistency in favour of one candidate, James Buller. In the poll overall, Buller won with 1,106 votes, whereas Baring and Bampfylde were on closer terms of 588 to 550 votes respectively.¹⁰⁵ In this sample of the political opinions of members of the Exeter Library Society, there seems to be more consistency than in the electorate as a whole, and almost universal support for the Chamber candidate.

4.3 Coleshill Book Club voters in 1775 Poll

Candidate	Votes in 1775 poll
Thomas Skipwith	8 of 8
Charles Holte	5 of 8
John Mordaunt	2 of 8

Of 19 members of the Coleshill Book Club which John Ludford recorded between 1774 and 1784, eight were found in the poll book from 1775 (see table 4.3).¹⁰⁶ Again, there was a remarkable consensus around Thomas Skipwith, voted for by all eight of the book club

¹⁰⁴ *A List of the Freemen and Freeholders, who Voted at the General Election for Two Representatives in Parliament for the City of Exeter* (1790, Exeter).

¹⁰⁵ P. A. Symonds and D. R. Fisher, 'The History of Parliament - Exeter', on History of Parliament Online, <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org> [26 June 2015].

¹⁰⁶ WCRO, CR2795/3 Ludford Journal; *The Poll of the Freeholders of Warwickshire: taken at Warwick, on the 20th, 21st, 22d, 24th, 25th, 26th, 27th, 28th, 29th, and 31st of October, 1774* (Warwickshire, 1775).

members found in the poll. Their second votes were divided between the other candidates, showing some difference of opinion. The Coleshill voters reflect the overall popularity of Skipwith, who won the poll with 2,954 votes, although there was disproportionate support within the club for Holte, who received 1,845 votes in total compared to Mordaunt's 1,787.¹⁰⁷

Six future members of the Dursley Reading Society from 1818-1828 voted in the Gloucestershire poll of 1811: five of them voted for Dutton, and one for Guise.¹⁰⁸ In the poll overall, Guise received 3,114 votes to Dutton's 2,663, showing that the Dursley readers displayed a uniform political character which was in contrast to the popular opinion of their constituency. Seven of the Stamford Library members listed in 1787 voted in a poll in 1809: six for Charles Chaplin Junior, and one for Joshua Oddy.¹⁰⁹ In the poll overall, 306 votes were cast for Chaplin and 142 for Oddy, showing the Stamford Library members' political leanings corresponded to those of the wider electorate.¹¹⁰ These small poll samples supplement the impression of community coherence that was clearly demonstrated in the larger poll book samples at Hull and Exeter. The five examples given here show a consistent pattern, whereby reading association members shared a favoured political candidate with the rest of the members, showing shared political standpoints at the time of polling. In the polls where two votes were cast, there was less consensus over the secondary candidates, showing reading associations were not defined by uniform voting practices and underlying political opinions.

It could be argued that the similar voting patterns of reading association members were simply the result of shared socio-economic or religious bases, rather than a specific commonality which brought the reading community together. In four of the five polls considered here, the majority of the reading community voted for the primary candidate who won the poll. However, a strong majority of votes in the Hull Subscription Library were cast for the candidate who only won by a narrow margin, suggesting there was more uniform and directed support within this library than amongst the wider electorate. More surprisingly, the

¹⁰⁷ J. A. Cannon, 'The History of Parliament - Warwickshire', on History of Parliament Online, <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org> [26 June 2015].

¹⁰⁸ BOD, MS. Top. Gloucestershire f. 1 Dursley Reading Society Minutes 1821-34; *The Poll at the Election of a Knight of the Shire for the County of Gloucester* (Gloucester, 1811).

¹⁰⁹ *Stamford* (1787); *Narrative of the Proceedings at the Stamford Election, February 1809; a Copy of the Poll Book and an Appendix* (Stamford, 1809).

¹¹⁰ R. G. Thorne, 'The History of Parliament - Stamford', on History of Parliament Online, <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org> [26 June 2015].

majority of the Dursley Reading Society voters were in favour of the candidate who lost the poll. Thus, while the reading communities usually reflected the opinion of the broader electorate, and thus their broadly stated socio-economic grouping as the 12-20% of adult males who had sufficient qualifications to vote,¹¹¹ they occasionally demonstrated collective opinions which were at odds with their overall constituency. The political allegiances of reading association members were not hegemonic or uniform, but there was a significant level of internal consensus amongst the community's voters. Whether this arose from similar values, shared connections or even canvassing amongst the reading community, cannot be said. As either a cause or a consequence of community participation, voting seems to have united association members, rather than causing conflict.

What, therefore, was the overall political identity of reading associations, and how did this change over time? Allan suggests that the membership of associations had more of a 'Dissenting tinge, and, during the 1790s especially, with at least a hint of discreetly veiled political radicalism'.¹¹² The Manchester New Circulating Library was linked with radicalism in the 1790s, and the founder of Leicester's Permanent Library was imprisoned for selling seditious literature.¹¹³ Christopher Skelton-Foord put forward a softer version of this political characterisation, arguing that 'book clubs and library societies were inspired by a spirit of liberalism or moral didacticism'.¹¹⁴ Conversely, St Clair argued that, despite their progressive enlightenment philosophies, reading associations were in no way 'liberal', but were rather composed of social conservatives who supported illiberal policies like the Bloody Code.¹¹⁵ These brief characterisations of the political standpoints of reading associations seem to rely on exceptional cases of dissenting, radical libraries, with little attention to the normative practice across the associational spectrum. St Clair's disavowal of reading associations' liberalism is based on the assertion that 'members of book clubs were the same men who, as members of the House of Commons and House of Lords, ... [were] extending the death penalty'.¹¹⁶ This dubious similitude between reading association members and the people

¹¹¹ J. Innes, 'People and Power in British Politics to 1850', in Innes and Philp, *Re-imagining Democracy*, 132.

¹¹² Allan, *Nation*, 67.

¹¹³ Ibid.; Kelly, *Early*, 132.

¹¹⁴ C. Skelton-Foord, 'Ethics and Ideology: the Philanthropic Ethos in British Community Libraries, 1780-1840', in P. Vodosek, A. Black and P. Hoare (eds), *Mäzenatentum für Bibliotheken* (Wiesbaden, 2004), 74.

¹¹⁵ St Clair, *Nation*, 259.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

who were active in the formation of national legislation cannot be sustained. However, this section will argue that social conservatism was particularly manifested in associations' statements of loyalism during the 1790s. Scandalous portrayals of radical reading associations were present in print culture, but reading associations themselves used a variety of means to announce their loyalist, patriotic allegiances. This contributes to the understanding of the middling-sort, provincial reaction to the principles of the French Revolution, and displays a retrenchment of associational practice in the face of its highly-publicised misuse by radicals.

A turning-point for associations was in the 1790s, when the general fear of political instability grew, and legislation against seditious societies was drawn up. General opinion certainly became more suspicious of associations in this period. An anonymous letter was sent to the Home Office in June 1794, denouncing a club at Hockliffe which 'assume the name of a Book Club... the reviewal of inflammatory publications is a leading object amongst them'.¹¹⁷ This club was also referred to as a 'conventicle', and whilst this letter suggests that these people were covering their subversive activities by pretending to be a book club, it shows that such associations were open to politicisation and abuse. A letter from Baronet Lovett of Buckinghamshire to the third Duke of Portland stated that these book club members are 'all to a man Dissenters, and some of them known Republicans'.¹¹⁸ In another letter he listed the members of the club, announcing that Daniel Parker was 'a rank Republican'.¹¹⁹ Some months later, the *Morning Chronicle* reported that the licence of the Star Inn, where this club met, had been revoked. Sarcastically, the newspaper commented that 'nothing can be clearer than if reading be suppressed, people will imbibe no mischievous notions from books'.¹²⁰

Whilst most of the commentators in the Hockliffe case seem to have perceived this institution as a fake book club rather than actually being one, other references to subversive clubs can be found. In 1798, one author wrote that in book clubs, 'novels of immoral

¹¹⁷ The National Archives, HO/42/32/270 f428-9.

¹¹⁸ Nottingham University Archives, PW F 6467, <http://mssweb.nottingham.ac.uk/catalogue/index.htm> [29 June 2015].

¹¹⁹ Nottingham University Archives, PW F 6468.

¹²⁰ *Morning Chronicle*, Sept. 23, 1794, Issue 7785.

tendency and such as promote Jacobinical principles are introduced'.¹²¹ In the same year, Thomas Bancroft wrote that book clubs had been recommended as a useful place to make Jacobin proselytes.¹²² In the early nineteenth century, the author of an article on Socinians in *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post* told of his experience at a book club in the north of England, which was abused by a 'presumptuous few' who ordered Socinian works.¹²³ Such anecdotes and assertions were not so prevalent as to suggest that reading associations really were a regular and feared outlet of sedition; they were, however, indicative of a public awareness of anomalous scandals in which reading associations were appropriated for radical causes.

Reading associations' vulnerability in the face of radical texts was highlighted by John Bowles' *A Protest against T. Paine's "Rights of Man", Addressed to the Members of a Book Society*, in 1792.¹²⁴ The pamphlet stated that, after Paine's book had been proposed in this club, the author had argued it was only suitable for 'the disaffected and the disloyal'.¹²⁵ However, 'the voice of the Majority' overruled him, so he wrote this pamphlet to explain his protest.¹²⁶ Paine's works seem to have been a particular flashpoint for discussions about reading associations and politics, which usually concluded in the expulsion of his works from the reading association. In the Ayr Library, Paine's books 'were burned in the presence of the Committee', providing a literary parallel to the 25,000 instances when Paine effigies were burned.¹²⁷ In the book club at the Spread Eagle in Lincoln, a pamphlet was burned for being libellous, 'not only upon the late unfortunate Marie Antoinette, but even upon the whole human species'.¹²⁸ In 1799, the Greenock Library expelled 'Godwin's Political Justice, Caleb Williams, Hugh Trevor, Volney Ruins of Empires, and Miss Williams' Works, New Annual Register and Monthly Review'.¹²⁹ At the Stowey Book Society earlier in the decade, John Poole had objected to Volney's works based on reviews he had read, which suggested they

¹²¹ *New Lights on Jacobinism*, abstracted from Professor Robinson's *History of Free Masonry* (Birmingham, 1798), 42.

¹²² The National Archives, PC1/43/152. Thanks to Joanna Innes for this reference.

¹²³ *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post or Plymouth and Cornish Advertiser*, Nov. 10, 1814, Issue 2566.

¹²⁴ J. Bowles, *A Protest against T. Paine's "Rights of Man": Addressed to the Members of the Book Society of —* (London, 1792).

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, iv.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, v.

¹²⁷ ACL, 027.441 Air Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776-1830, 72-73; W. A. Speck, *Literature and Society in Eighteenth-Century England, 1680-1820: Ideology, Politics and Culture* (London, 1998), 143.

¹²⁸ *The Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, Feb. 7, 1794, Issue 3283.

¹²⁹ WLA, WA1/1/1/1 Greenock Library Minute Book 1794-1815, 10.

were 'strongly tinged with infidelity'.¹³⁰ He also wrote in his journal that he objected to the acquisition of political pamphlets, as they may be 'the occasion of contention and ill-will among the members'.¹³¹ There was thus a dual problem with such works: their inherently dangerous content, and the polarising effect they might have on the community. In 1819, a curiously belated controversy broke out in the York Book Society over Paine's *Age of Reason*.¹³² The withdrawal of the book from circulation was reported in *The Morning Post*, *The Yorkshire Gazette*, *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle*, *Liverpool Mercury* and *The Lancaster Gazette*, suggesting widespread interest in this story.¹³³ Eventually the *Age of Reason* was 'burnt by the Librarian, in the presence of the members'.¹³⁴ Perhaps interest in this publication had been reignited by the three biographies of Paine published that year;¹³⁵ and the York Book Society's rejection of Paine shows reading associations' continued commitment to the repudiation of radical literature.

Newspapers and magazines were similarly used to define the political allegiances of associations. The Eclectic Book Society of London were horrified at *The Monthly Magazine*'s 'prejudiced and flagrant misrepresentations, of the splendid victories achieved by the British Army and those of the Allies' in December 1813.¹³⁶ It was felt that the magazine had stripped Wellington of his laurels, contradicting the support that Englishmen ought to give to the government. The society 'deem it inconsistent with its professed object longer to sanction a publication so detrimental to the cause of Truth and Liberty'.¹³⁷ Reading associations thus seem to have reacted to wider political controversies, while not seeking to proscribe political discussions within their walls.

This prevalent response to radical and un-patriotic texts shows that reading associations conceived of themselves, and sought to act in ways which showed them, as loyalists. Their methods of patriotic self-presentation extended beyond their choice of literature. The Kendal Book Club's annual dinner was said to have included 'the usual routine

¹³⁰ H. Sandford, *Thomas Poole and his Friends*, 2 Vols (London, 1888), i. 86.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² *The Yorkshire Gazette*, Dec. 11, 1819, Issue 34.

¹³³ *The Morning Post*, Dec. 16, 1819, Issue 15260; *The Yorkshire Gazette*, Dec. 18, 1819, Issue 35; *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle*, Dec. 20, 1819, Issue 1054; *Liverpool Mercury*, Dec. 24, 1819, Issue 444; *The Lancaster Gazette and General Advertiser, for Lancashire, Westmorland, &c.*, Dec. 31, 1819, Issue 968.

¹³⁴ *The Yorkshire Gazette*, Jan. 15, 1820, Issue 39.

¹³⁵ E. Larkin, *Thomas Paine and the Literature of Revolution* (Cambridge, 2005), 164.

¹³⁶ LMA, CLC/064/MS00988A The Eclectic Book Society Minute Book 1812-1820, 21.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 21-22.

of loyal and constitutional toasts', as did the Wells Book Society dinner.¹³⁸ Another way in which loyalist identities were cultivated was through donations to charitable causes. The Brigg Book Club gave ten pounds 'for the purchase of flannel waistcoats for the use of our troops on the continent' and subscribed to a 'Grand Naval Pillar to perpetuate the glorious Victories of the British Navy'.¹³⁹ The George Book Club in Huntingdon similarly provided 200 waistcoats for troops, and another club donated money for the same purpose.¹⁴⁰ Money for the families of killed soldiers was given by the book club at the Black Bull in Cambridge, the Brigg Book Club, and a book society in Malling.¹⁴¹ Readers' sympathies extended to those in other countries: the Langford Book Club donated to a campaign for the clergy in France during the revolution, perhaps showing empathy with other middling sorts even across national divides.¹⁴² In avoiding connections with radicalism, and supporting loyalist causes, reading associations showed their values to be based on their broad standpoint of patriotic citizenship, and the need for the individual to support and participate in the society in which they lived. However, their conception of equality was limited to the internal relations between literate, respectable citizens, rather than supporting the fuller enfranchisement of perceived radicals or jacobins.

V. Conclusion: Associations and Models of Social Structure

The political tensions of the 1790s instigated a redefinition of reading association allegiances. In response to the French Revolution and the following wars, the examples given here have shown that some reading associations adopted a loyalist, patriotic stance.

¹³⁸ *The Westmorland Gazette*, Aug. 26, 1826, Issue 416; *The Norfolk Chronicle and Norwich Gazette*, Apr. 15, 1820, Issue 1615.

¹³⁹ *The Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, Dec. 6, 1793, Issue 3274; *The Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, Nov. 8, 1799, Issue 3581.

¹⁴⁰ *Sun*, Nov. 15, 1793, Issue 353; *Morning Chronicle*, Jan. 6, 1794, Issue 7675.

¹⁴¹ *Morning Chronicle*, Dec. 9, 1797, Issue 8906; *True Briton*, Jan. 22, 1798, Issue 1585; *Evening Mail*, June 14-17, 1793, Issue 673.

¹⁴² *Diary or Woodfall's Register*, Dec. 1, 1792, Issue 1154.

As well as rejecting radical texts, they sought to sponsor loyalist causes. This exploration of politics within reading associations rebuts the idea that they were politically neutral arenas; rather, they engaged in defensive loyalism at a time when associational activity was tarnished by radical organisations, and they did not often seek to create a determinedly non-political environment.

With membership profiles that were broadly similar to those of the middling Church and King societies, it is perhaps unsurprising that reading associations portrayed themselves as loyalist associations during the 1790s. Although there was some political division between loyalism and reform or radicalism in the 1790s, this was still a majority position rather than a sectarian stance. Manley's assertion that 'on many library committees, conflict between Tories and Anglican clergy on the one hand and Whigs and Dissenters on other other hand were often fought out' and 'national politics were played out on a local level in many libraries' misrepresents associations that were predominantly made up of like-minded voters who subscribed to internal identity codes and practices.¹⁴³ Political conflict relating to national politics or electoral candidates was not a significant feature of library formation or cohesion in the sample examined here. Allan suggests that associations were 'meeting places' which integrated people by 'drawing the sting of rivalry and contention'.¹⁴⁴ Whilst this may have been an enlightenment ideal to which rhetorical obeisance was paid, in reality associations seem to have undertaken a less difficult task, of solidifying communities with similar socio-political stances. Analysis of poll books suggests that reading association communities were united by similar voting practices amongst their members, although variation in secondary candidates suggests that this was not a dogmatic cornerstone of their collective identity. Harmony was not orchestrated through prescriptive legislation to avoid divisive literature, but instead the rule of the majority was thought to be sufficient and authoritative to decide on sensitive issues as they arose, in line with their legalistic, contractual principles. This instituted an arena of social activity which was truly civil society, an idealised community which considered members in isolation from the divisions which custom, religion and politics generated elsewhere.

¹⁴³ Manley, 'Bentham', 174, 180.

¹⁴⁴ Allan, 'Politeness', 165-166.

When elaborating upon the broader effect of these principles and the associational communities that enacted them, many historians have turned to ideas of class formation. Geoff Eley argued that associations were the 'logical form of bourgeois emancipation', and Barry examines them as examples of 'bourgeois collectivism'.¹⁴⁵ However, this model is problematic when applied to reading associations, which flourished in market towns like Dursley and Kendal, and small villages like Sedbergh. Furthermore, their membership was not exclusively drawn from the middling sorts, but the Dursley Reading Society encompassed members identified as 'gentry' in the local directory.¹⁴⁶ These reading associations did not articulate an ideology of class, or even use socio-demographic criteria to define their communities, but did offer a formative experience of behavioural commonality amongst locally-specific elites.¹⁴⁷ This thesis is thus aligned with other works which have recognised associations' integrative, social functions within their communities.¹⁴⁸

R. J. Morris has been the key proponent of the idea that, in nineteenth-century Leeds, associations were 'the basis of class formation in public life'.¹⁴⁹ He argues that associations allowed the middle classes to influence other classes, by public improvements and philanthropy, but also enabled them to become more aware of the common ground between themselves and other middling sorts.¹⁵⁰ Importantly, voluntary associations allowed the middle classes to engage in public action without resolving their variant political, confessional and sectarian identities.¹⁵¹ A key ideological hinge of Morris' middle-class associations is the idea of order.¹⁵² Civil society was defined by the 'rule of law', and 'practices of debate and transparency' allowed the middle classes to come together.¹⁵³ This chapter extends Morris' analysis, by showing that many of these features can be found in earlier reading associations. Certainly, in the eighteenth- as well as the nineteenth-century reading

¹⁴⁵ G. Eley, 'Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century', Working Paper 1990, 6; Barry, 'Bourgeois Collectivism', 84-112.

¹⁴⁶ *Pigot & Co.'s Royal National and Commercial Directory: Gloucestershire* (London, 1842), 103-106 includes J. P. B. Purnell esq., John Wallington esq., Henry Clifford Clifford, Lord of the Manor of Frampton on Severn, and Captain Samuel White.

¹⁴⁷ For example, E. Griffin, 'The Making of the Chartists: Popular Politics and Working-Class Autobiography in Early Victorian Britain', *English Historical Review*, Vol. CXXIX, No. 538 (June, 2014), 585 argues that experience of leadership within reading groups increased their members' 'capacity for political action' later in life.

¹⁴⁸ Clark, *Clubs*, 446; Barry, 'Bourgeois Collectivism', 84-112.

¹⁴⁹ Morris, *Class*, 321.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 169, 178.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 321; See also Van Horn Melton, *Rise*, 115.

¹⁵³ Morris, *Men*, 65, 66.

associations examined in this chapter, order was a central concept which guaranteed good governance, and community harmony. This thesis thus illuminates the later-eighteenth century precursors of the 'visibility' and 'formality' which Morris describes in mid-nineteenth century associations.¹⁵⁴

A second aspect of Morris' argument which this thesis enhances is his definition of two types of voluntary organisation: the 'patronage society' and the 'membership society'.¹⁵⁵ The patronage society allowed an elite 'to transfer resources to another social group' or sponsor cultural activities amongst other social groups. His study is mainly devoted to institutions of this type, including the Leeds Infirmary, Mechanics' Institute, Temperance Society and Poor Relief Funds. The second type of organisation, membership societies, is briefly defined: 'simply provided services for members paid for by members, but it could contain hierarchical elements'.¹⁵⁶ He elucidates this through a case study of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society, founded in 1818, which 'made a complex use of scientific and literary culture to assert the status of their class and community'.¹⁵⁷ This chapter supplements Morris' nineteenth-century case study by showing the cultural, status functions of reading associations in the preceding half-century, which created horizontal ties between readers, sharing ideas and cultural attitudes, as well as endowing members with citizenship rights and responsibilities.

Based on the associational philosophy outlined in chapter three, this chapter argues that associations did not explicitly define a class interest, but rather developed the status of readers, which differentiated them from the unlettered in their communities. As a tool in the politics of culture, they elevated members to the status of consumers of and contributors to a pervasive literary culture. Reading associations united a variety of middling sorts, and argued for their collective status as virtuous 'gentlemen' defined by their learning and sociability rather than by class or professional characteristics. At the same time, the contractual community of the associations levelled distinctions between these readers, contributing to a coalescence of identity around their social and intellectual characteristics rather than economic or customary status. Rather than equality being 'another emphasis' of

¹⁵⁴ Morris, *Class*, 168.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 191-192.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 228.

associations,¹⁵⁸ this account of reading associations has demonstrated that their pursuit of internal equality was more rhetorically and practically significant than their creation of internal hierarchies. As a reflection on Georgian patterns of sociability, therefore, this chapter has shown that politics and religion were not contentious topics which had to be avoided in polite company, but were safely managed by codes of civility, which instead focused attention on cultural divisions between the cultured and the uncultured, the polite and the impolite, the lettered and the unlettered.

To what extent do reading associations conform to the principles of the bourgeois public sphere, outlined by Jürgen Habermas? In this seminal account of the eighteenth-century 'structural transformation', the arena in which courtly power was represented to the people changed into a sphere in which power was monitored and discussed by the people.¹⁵⁹ This 'public sphere' was predicated upon towns,¹⁶⁰ and arose in 'the specific historical circumstances of a developing market economy' in the 1690s.¹⁶¹ The public sphere was defined by being universally accessible, and for contemplating matters of general significance, based on the public use of reason.¹⁶² Institutions such as literary societies and coffeehouses were important in the reification of this public sphere.¹⁶³

The Habermasian model of the public sphere has been challenged in a variety of ways. His interdisciplinary perspective is open to methodological criticism: Keith Baker argues that the specific temporal and ideological setting in which Habermas places his argument is a melange of the sociological context of later seventeenth-century Britain with the philosophy of Europe.¹⁶⁴ Historians have also shown the applicability of the public sphere model to earlier periods, thus questioning the accuracy of its 'emergence' in this period.¹⁶⁵ The universal access which Habermas describes is also a sticking point: Joad Raymond argues that interest groups and power structures imposed upon the public sphere in a variety

¹⁵⁸ Barry, 'Bourgeois Collectivism', 101.

¹⁵⁹ J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, 1989).

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁶¹ T. McCarthy, 'Introduction', in *Ibid.*, xi.

¹⁶² Habermas, *Structural*, 37, 85.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 27, 32-36, 40-43.

¹⁶⁴ K. M. Baker, 'Defining the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France: Variations of a Theme by Habermas', in C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (London, 1996), 190.

¹⁶⁵ P. Lake and S. Pincus, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere in Early Modern England', *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (Apr., 2006), 270-292; J. Raymond, 'The Newspaper, Public Opinion, and the Public Sphere in the Seventeenth Century' in J. Raymond (ed.), *News, Newspapers, and Society in Early Modern Britain* (London, 1999), 109-140.

of ways.¹⁶⁶ Markman Ellis likewise notes the existence of gender hierarchies within the archetypal public-sphere location, the coffeehouse.¹⁶⁷ Others have emphasised that Habermas' paradigm mixes both a historical assessment and a normative programme of how the public sphere should be; David Zaret argues that the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere is an ideal type and it is therefore 'facile' to point out the ways in which the historical record differs from Habermas' account.¹⁶⁸ Habermas himself recognised that the equality and accessibility of the public sphere was not 'actually realized in earnest...but as an idea it had become institutionalized'.¹⁶⁹ This chapter's analysis of reading association principles and structures thus tests whether reason, accessibility, legality and equality were central 'ideas' within reading associations, notwithstanding general acknowledgement that such principles were rarely realised.

The relationship of reading associations to the Habermasian public sphere initially seems clear: Habermas himself argued that book clubs 'formed the public sphere of a rational-critical debate in the world of letters', and that the public 'from the outset was a reading public'.¹⁷⁰ They were institutions which purveyed literature of general interest, appealing to conceptions of the 'imagined community' of the reading nation.¹⁷¹ They constituted a discursive environment, and were often linked to prototypical sociable forums like coffeehouses and taverns. Habermas also argued for a 'bourgeois idea of the law-based state' which was 'legitimated by public opinion'.¹⁷² This consensual, legal public is epitomised by the constitutional nature of reading associations outlined in this chapter. Yet, rather than being apolitical and disconnected from state authority, associations brought like-minded voters together, rarely sought to prohibit controversial discussion, and even declared their allegiance to the state during the 1790s: their 'rational-critical' function as a check on state power is thereby in doubt. In fact, this chapter argues that reading associations built upon

¹⁶⁶ Raymond, 'The Newspaper', 119-129; see also Van Horn Melton, *Rise*, 10.

¹⁶⁷ M. Ellis, 'Coffee-Women, The Spectator and the Public Sphere in the Early Eighteenth Century', in E. Eger, C. Grant, C. Gallchoir and P. Warburton (eds), *Women, Writing and the Public Sphere, 1700-1830* (Cambridge, 2001), 32.

¹⁶⁸ Baker, 'Defining', 183; D. Zaret, 'Religion, Science, and Printing in the Public Spheres in Seventeenth-Century England', in Calhoun, *Habermas*, 212-213.

¹⁶⁹ Habermas, *Structural*, 36.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 51, 23.

¹⁷¹ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised edn (London, 2006); M. R. M. Towsey, *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment: Books and Their Readers in Provincial Scotland, 1750-1820* (Leiden, 2010), 90.

¹⁷² Habermas, *Structural*, 82.

widely held principles of governance to construct themselves as an exemplar of good government, rather than a critical challenge to it.

In line with other historical critiques of the public sphere model, this study has shown that the credit which was necessary to join a reading association prevented them from being universally accessible; indeed, the status-function and values of associations discussed in chapter three suggest that they deliberately cultivated exclusivity and prestige. However, the primacy of the use of reason, and the definition of the public as readers, does fit Habermas' broadly-defined 'public' sphere: indeed, the 'reading public' of associations was the most clearly defined and visible 'public'. The reading public was a self-conscious entity, which maintained a privileged position as overseers of culture in the same way that associational committees regulated community practices. The qualification of being a reader may have been a shorthand for other forms of social exclusivity, as it was predicated on literacy, the finances to acquire books (or library shares), and in some instances gender; but equally, these concomitant distinctions were not always present, and thus female, or poor readers could gain access to this public sphere by virtue of their primary characteristic as readers. The eighteenth-century reading public, constructed as an imagined audience by authors as well as manifested by readers who joined together in associations, does therefore fulfil many of the ideological criteria which Habermas suggested. Its significance as a new category of social differentiation is clear, in the great popularity and numerical significance of reading associations, which legitimised their members as conscientious components of the literary public.

This chapter has advanced our understanding of associational community in the later eighteenth century, suggesting that reading associations aimed to construct internal equality, through constitution and contract; a behavioural identity based on shared philosophies and 'open', honourable community practices rather than class-consciousness; and a belief in consensus politics rather than doctrinaire party principles or outright avoidance of controversy. They were a forum in which middling men (and women) from a variety of occupational backgrounds could assert their commonality of interest, but also their equality through law and contract. This built upon the unifying rhetoric of knowledge and virtue, which transcended disciplinary boundaries as well as social or political divides. Whilst some argue

that subscription societies 'had no explicitly social, political or literary aim', they nevertheless contributed to the construction of the reading public and the public sphere.¹⁷³ The reading association was one of the Georgian venues in which new 'publics' coalesced, transforming the judgements of individuals into 'public opinion'.¹⁷⁴ Reading associations became a cultural actor, representing a disparate range of readers. If Shaftesbury's politeness was a 'new Whiggish culture' which rejected the authority of Church and Court, reading associations similarly incorporated their members into a non-aristocratic public, supported by the critical apparatus of the print world.¹⁷⁵ Reading associations did not create a bourgeoisie, but rather made their members into citizens of the reading public, giving them a stake and an influence, and acting as a conduit for their cultural participation.

¹⁷³ Van Horn Melton, *Rise*, 106.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-2, 38, 160.

¹⁷⁵ L. E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1994), 8.

Chapter Five

Gender and Family in Associations

I. Introduction

This chapter will use the framework of reading associations in order to consider gender, age and family in this period, examining how associations were involved in the formation and practice of these identities. Reading associations seem unusual amongst the broader spectrum of associations, in particular offering opportunities to women which were not available in other forms of intellectual clubs. Studying associations as a liminal space enables a reconsideration of the traditional dichotomy of 'public' and 'private' spheres, as well as their gender connotations. This chapter also elaborates upon the significance of reading in the eighteenth century, showing that it was an activity through which women could claim moral authority in the home as educators, as well as obtaining respect and rights within reading associations and, by extension, local communities. Reading, and associational participation, was also part of identity performance for young people and for the elderly. Reading associations were a place of intergenerational sociability as well as individual self-fashioning.

Feminist historians originally drew attention to women's stories, which they sought to integrate into an otherwise male historical narrative. Subsequently, gender history considered both women and men, in order to examine the ways in which gender was fashioned and performed by both sexes. One of the most influential outcomes of this research, in relation to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was the characterisation of the 'separate spheres'

of men and women, most famously outlined by Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall.¹ They argued that private and public spheres became increasingly associated with gender by the middle classes, leaving women 'engulfed by the private realm, bounded by physical, social and psychic partitions'.² However, this model has been challenged in a variety of ways. The boundaries between 'public' and 'private' were 'blurred and permeable',³ and Anthony Fletcher suggests that women acted outside the home in 'multifarious' ways.⁴ John Tosh argues that it was men's prerogative to participate in both spheres, and studies of men's relationship to their households have sought to reintegrate them into this 'domestic' sphere.⁵ The idea of 'discrete spatial and sociological spheres' has therefore been described as a 'fallacy'.⁶ This critique of gendered spheres relates to similar objections against Habermas' paradigm of public and private spheres, namely the imperfect correlation of theory to the lived practices of men and women, who could transgress their supposedly allotted arenas. Furthermore, Robert Shoemaker emphasised the continuities of gender roles through the early modern period, suggesting that the changes of the long eighteenth century were 'less restrictive' than portrayed in the separate spheres model.⁷ This chapter will further develop these critiques of the 'separate spheres' model, by demonstrating the permeability of the boundaries of 'household' and 'associational' space, showing that they were neither physically nor ideologically separate.

Eighteenth-century cultural changes altered gender roles by giving women more agency in religious and domestic life, manifest in their involvement with charitable organisations, sociability and family education.⁸ Women's cultural role was also enhanced

¹ L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (London, 1987).

² Davidoff and Hall, *Family*, 319.

³ H. Barker and E. Chalus, 'Introduction', in H. Barker and E. Chalus (eds), *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England: Roles, Representations and Responsibilities* (London, 1997), 3.

⁴ A. Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500-1800* (London, 1999), 264.

⁵ J. Tosh, 'The Old Adam and the New Man: Emerging Themes in the History of English Masculinities, 1750-1850', in T. Hitchcock and M. Cohen (eds), *English Masculinities 1660-1800* (London, 1999), 230. For example, K. Harvey, *The Little Republic: Masculinity and Domestic Authority in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2012); J. Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (London, 1999).

⁶ M. McCormack, *The Independent Man: Citizenship and Gender Politics in Georgian England* (Manchester, 2005).

⁷ R. B. Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society, 1650-1850: The Emergence of Separate Spheres?* (London, 1998), 10.

⁸ Shoemaker, *Gender*, 268, 281, 316.

due to new philosophical understandings of their civilising influence on conversation.⁹ Conversation, and sociability, was 'poised between private and public realms' acting as a meeting point between male and female activities, and problematising the elision of these with 'public' and 'private' settings.¹⁰ Despite women's role as cultural arbiters, the culture of politeness is often conceived of as a discourse employed in the construction of gentlemanliness.¹¹ Michele Cohen suggests that the feminine and French connotations of polite conversation made it a vexed part of masculine performance.¹² Sociability was thus an important and ambiguous activity in which gender was negotiated and performed, and this chapter studies a supposedly 'masculine' enclave of sociability, the association, in order to illuminate the complexities of gender identity in these social environments.

In contrast to the cultural role accorded to women in sociability within domestic circles, associations are often depicted as archetypal 'public' and 'homosocial' spaces. As part of their delineation of gendered spheres, Davidoff and Hall argue that 'new forms of manliness found one of their most powerful expressions in formal associations'.¹³ This was also linked to their role in expressing 'middle-class weight and responsibility'.¹⁴ Similarly, Shoemaker argues that voluntary societies 'allowed middle-class men to claim a public, political role for themselves'.¹⁵ Margaret Hunt suggests that for both men and boys, societies lauded literacy and virtue.¹⁶ Clark agrees that clubs were 'bastions of traditional male perceptions of sociable behaviour', and that 'the vast majority of clubs and societies were exclusively masculine bodies'.¹⁷ However, historians concede that certain subsets of associational activity were coded feminine, such as anti-slavery associations, or informal charity work.¹⁸ John Tosh notes that 'subscription libraries... were more likely to permit

⁹ T. Hitchcock, 'Introduction', in Hitchcock and Cohen, *English Masculinities*, 19-21; Shoemaker, *Gender*, 29.

¹⁰ E. Eger, "'The noblest commerce of mankind': Conversation and Community in the Bluestocking Circle", in S. Knott and B. Taylor (eds), *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (Basingstoke, 2007), 290.

¹¹ L. E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1994).

¹² M. Cohen, 'Manliness, Effeminacy and the French: Gender and the Construction of National Character in Eighteenth-Century England', in Hitchcock and Cohen, *English Masculinities*, 44-62.

¹³ Davidoff and Hall, *Family*, 416.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Shoemaker, *Gender*, 242.

¹⁶ M. R. Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680-1780* (London, 1996), 105-109.

¹⁷ P. Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford, 2000), 203, 191. Ibid., 204 suggests that women became more involved after 1800, with the rise of public subscription associations which were larger and more impersonal communities.

¹⁸ Davidoff and Hall, *Family*, 430-436; Shoemaker, *Gender*, 245.

female participation', but assumes that this means they 'carried less cachet'.¹⁹ This chapter argues that reading associations do not conform to this historiography, being more accessible to women than most associational activities were. What was the extent, significance and logic of women's participation in reading associations, and what does this tell us about the construction of gender in relation to reading, and associational life?

Contemporary ideas about reading were complicated and paradoxical, as traditional ideas of devotional reading and study were being challenged by the arrival of new genres, commercial culture, and leisurely reading practices. The issue of women's reading thus became particularly fraught, as a microcosm of the concerns relating to luxury, idleness, and wider access to literature. Jacqueline Pearson argues that reading became a 'central moral metaphor' between 1750 and 1835, with misreading being gendered as feminine.²⁰ The authors of advice literature were particularly concerned about women reading imaginative literature, as their natural emotions were thought to make them more vulnerable to such fantasies; although Pearson also points out that most genres were identified as dangerous to women in some way.²¹ Women became particularly associated with the dangerous new craze for novels, with the female novel-reader becoming a trope within fiction itself.²² Furthermore, diaries suggest that this discourse affected women's self-awareness of their reading practice.²³ As an extension of this discourse, the commercial circulating library was (and often still is) portrayed as the frivolous domain of feminine fiction, and was contrasted with masculine reading institutions.²⁴

However, the literary-historical focus on women's reading in terms of novels and circulating libraries has been questioned by historians who point out that less than one-third of circulating library subscribers were women.²⁵ Furthermore, Jan Fergus' analysis of

¹⁹ Tosh, *A Man's Place*, 134.

²⁰ J. Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (Cambridge, 1999), 8, 5.

²¹ Pearson, *Women's Reading*, 18-19, 42-43.

²² S. Curran, 'Women Readers, Women Writers' in S. Curran (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, Second edn (Cambridge, 2010), 173.

²³ S. Colclough, *Consuming Texts: Readers and Reading Communities, 1695-1870* (Basingstoke, 2007), 61-62.

²⁴ See P. Kaufman, 'In Defence of Fair Readers', in P. Kaufman, *Libraries and their Users: Collected Papers in Library History* (London, 1969), 223; J. Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1997), 179-180; W. St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge, 2004), 242-244.

²⁵ Kaufman, 'In Defence', 224; M. R. M. Towsey, *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment: Books and Their Readers in Provincial Scotland, 1750-1820* (Leiden, 2010), 103.

booksellers' ledgers offers 'no evidence for a largely female reading public for fiction'; indeed, one-third of novels were purchased by schoolboys.²⁶ Fergus thus concludes that eighteenth-century men, women and children 'cross culturally defined gender lines more often than we suppose'.²⁷ Polly Bull argues that reading practice was not affected by gender, despite the gendering of the cultural environment in which readers read.²⁸ Such research indicates that, whilst the gendered prescriptions for reading are clear, their impact upon practice is yet to be established. This chapter will illuminate the gender contours of associational practices, which rarely sought to differentiate reading practice or associational roles based on their members' sex. However, the overarching discursive framework of reading associations embedded reading within the domestic, familial environment, thus offering public opportunities to women albeit within traditional spatial and ideological frameworks.

This chapter will examine the participation, influence and experience of women within reading associations, in order to resolve the conflicting accounts about the impact of prescriptions regarding public and private, and of male and female reading. Pearson argued that the contemporary crisis about women's reading was due to the danger that books posed, in connecting the domestic environment with the wider world and thus subverting the separate spheres.²⁹ Reading associations will be shown to have institutionally subverted the ideology of separate spheres in many more ways. The complicity of associations' male members in this process suggests the moralists' ideal was not a desirable or realistic prospect for these propertied men and women. This chapter will consider women's participation in reading associations; the discursive and practical significance of the household; the importance of family in associational spaces; and constructions of age within this environment.

²⁶ J. Fergus, *Provincial Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 2006), 15; 118.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁸ P. E. Bull, 'The Reading Lives of English Men and Women, 1695-1830', Unpublished PhD Thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London 2012, 58, 32.

²⁹ Pearson, *Women's Reading*, 2.

II. Women in Associational Life

Reading associations have traditionally been viewed as masculine environments, in conformity to the general narrative of homosocial associationalism in this period.³⁰ St Clair argued that reading cultures were gendered, separating a masculine associational sphere from feminised circulating-library reading, concluding that there was an 'almost total absence of women' in subscription libraries, and that 'the two reading spheres were separate even within the walls of the same household'.³¹ However, other historians of reading associations have drawn attention to the participation of women in reading associations: Towsey concludes that subscription libraries 'could allow a role for women in the intellectual culture of provincial Scotland'.³² Allan argues that women may have benefited more than men from book clubs, and that they were 'involved on perfectly satisfactory terms' as an 'active minority of participants'.³³ He similarly suggests that women accounted for 10-20% of subscription library members, although they had less influence there, finding it 'all but impossible to exert meaningful gubernatorial equality'.³⁴ This reverses the older arguments of Paul Kaufman, who suggested that the bureaucracy of membership procedures at subscription libraries meant that anyone could join, whereas book clubs were more intimate environments, and thus less accessible to women.³⁵ Even the most recent historiography reiterates that women were often excluded from participation, and dates their increased involvement to 1800.³⁶ A complicating factor in analysis of women's participation in reading associations, as in other fields of study, is their absence from official records, despite their informal or vicarious involvement through male relatives.³⁷

³⁰ T. Kelly, *Early Public Libraries: A History of Public Libraries in Great Britain before 1850* (London, 1966), 139; Brewer, *Pleasures*, 180. Recent research has reiterated this: R. F. King, 'Aspects of Sociability in the North East of England, 1600-1750', Unpublished PhD Thesis, Durham University, 2001, 87-88; Bull, 'Reading Lives', 134-135.

³¹ St Clair, *Nation*, 252, 260.

³² Towsey, *Reading*, 64-65.

³³ D. Allan, *A Nation of Readers: The Lending Library in Georgian England* (London, 2008), 39.

³⁴ Allan, *Nation*, 79, 84.

³⁵ P. Kaufman, 'English Book Clubs and their Social Import', in *Libraries and their Users*, 58.

³⁶ I. Ferris, *Book-Men, Book Clubs, and the Romantic Literary Sphere* (Basingstoke, 2015), 5; A. Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (London, 2003), 258.

³⁷ Allan, *Nation*, 78-82; D. Allan, 'Some Methods and Problems in the History of Reading: Georgian England and the Scottish Enlightenment', *Journal of the Historical Society*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2003), 102.

5.1 Membership Breakdown of Reading Associations, 1755-1829

Association	Date	Total Members	Men	Women	Women as %
Wye Book Club	1755	15	15	0	0
Liverpool Library	1760	140	134	6	4
Birmingham Book Society	1775	24	24	0	0
Whitby Subscription Library	1775	33	33	0	0
Exeter Library Society	1776	79	77	2	3
Hull Subscription Library	1776	69	65	4	6
Ayr Library Society	1777	47	45	2	4
Coleshill Book Club	1779	20	20	0	0
Macclesfield Circulating Library	1779	22	22	0	0
Sedbergh Book Club	1782	27	24	3	11
Halifax Circulating Library	1785	129	103	23	18
Leeds Circulating Library	1785	375	327	48	13
Stamford Subscription Library	1787	46	41	5	11
Duns Subscription Library	1789	54	51	3	6
Stamford Subscription Library	1789	60	53	7	12
Bristol Library Society	1790	168	161	7	4
Kelso Library	1790	71	68	3	4
Sedbergh Book Club	1790	28	25	3	11
Malton Subscription Library	1791	50	43	7	14
Huntingdon Book Club	1793	70	70	0	0
Manchester Circulating Library	1794	329	276	53	16
Wigtown Subscription Library	1795	44	40	4	9
Macclesfield Subscription Library	1796	64	56	8	13
Kilmarnock Public Library	1797	81	77	4	5
York Book Society	1797	28	27	1	4
Bristol Library Society	1798	199	190	9	5
Luddenden Circulating Library	1798	24	23	1	4
Ayr Library Society	1802	103	92	11	11
Greenock Library	1805	55	54	1	2
Sheffield Book Society	1806	30	27	3	10
Glasgow Public Library	1810	472	469	3	1
Tavistock Public Subscription Library	1810	25	21	4	16
Kilmarnock Public Library	1811	122	115	7	6
Eclectic Book Society	1813	12	12	0	0
Ayr, Newton, and Wallacetown Library	1814	35	35	0	0
Whitby Subscription Library	1814	43	37	6	14
Bampton Reading Society	1815	38	37	1	3
Lincoln Library	1815	234	198	36	15
Edgbaston and Five Ways Book Society	1816	24	19	5	21
Ayr Library Society	1817	104	91	13	13
Select Subscription Library York	1818	74	66	8	11
Barnard Castle Book Club	1819	13	13	0	0
Book Society of Twelve	1819	12	9	3	25
Haworth Subscription Library	1820	73	70	3	4
Sedbergh Book Club	1821	21	20	1	5
Guthlaxton Book Society	1823	9	9	0	0
Ludlow Library	1823	44	36	8	18
Deritend and Bordesley Book Club	1827	24	22	2	8
Dursley Reading Society (1819-1828)	1828	41	30	11	27
Doncaster Subscription Library	1829	129	99	30	23
Average before 1800		85	77	8	7
Average after 1800		76	69	7	10
Overall Average		81	73	7	8

The inclusion and occasional authority of women within reading associations problematises the idea of associational life as an exclusively or inherently male activity. Table 5.1 analyses the composition of a sample of 50 membership lists of reading associations, ranging from 1755 to 1829.³⁸ Only 10 of these lists did not include women. This means that, in contrast to assertions that ‘the vast majority of clubs and societies were exclusively masculine bodies’, women were in fact present in four-fifths of reading associations.³⁹ As table 5.1 shows, women accounted for 8% of members across this sample. 27 of these membership lists were from prior to 1800, and the average proportion of women in these societies was 7%. For the 23 lists after 1800, the average proportion of women was 10%. This suggests that women’s involvement did increase over time, although there was not a dramatic change in the acceptability of female members.

Moving beyond their sheer presence within associations, in what ways were women involved in associational life? Clark suggests that women in associations were generally restricted to segregated areas, or participated in honorary capacities.⁴⁰ Were women thus second-class citizens of the literary republic, or accorded equal rights? As has already been noted in chapter four, it was frequently legislated that women should vote by proxy.⁴¹ Other concessions were made for women: at Shipston-upon-Stour Reading Society, ladies only paid three shillings for their dinner, while men paid five shillings.⁴² Such legislation seems to

³⁸ LPL, MS 1694 Wye Book Club Papers. Rules and Accounts 1755-1766, 5; *Liverpool* (1760), 12-15; LBAS, Birmingham Archives MS2571/1/1/1 ‘Book Club Minutes’, 1; *Whitby* (1814), 9-10 lists for 1775 and 1814; DA, Z19/41/2 Exeter Library Society Accounts 1777-1789, 1-5; Crosse, *Account*, 23; ACL, 027.441 Air Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776-1830, 7; WCRO, CR2795/3 Ludford Journal; *Macclesfield* (1779), 2; CAC, WPR/59/2 Sedbergh Book Club, lists for 1782, 1790 and 1821; *Halifax* (1786), 69-71; *Leeds* (1785), 104-110; *Stamford* (1787), 14; *Duns* (1789); *Stamford* (1789), 1; *Bristol* (1790), 9-15; *Kelso* (1790), 65-67; HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library Laws, 6-7; *Huntingdon* (1793), 21-24; *Manchester* (1794), 82-86; HL, MS 5/27 Wigtown Subscription Library, 1-2; *Macclesfield* (1796), 41-42; *York Book Society* (1797), 16; BMC, AA/DC/180/1 Kilmarnock Public Library Minutes 1797-1823, 12-21; *Bristol* (1798), ix-xv; WYAS, SPL236 Luddenden Circulating Library Records, 2; *Ayr* (1802), 8-10; WLA, WA1/1/1/1 Greenock Library Minute Book 1794-1815, list for 1805; BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 7 (67); *Glasgow* (1810); *Tavistock* (1810), n.p.; *Kilmarnock* (1811), 57-60; LMA, CLC/064/MS00988A The Eclectic Book Society Minute Book 1812-1820, 7; *Newton* (1814), 5; BOD, G. Pamph. 540 (1) *A catalogue of the books of the Bampton Reading Society* (1815), 3-4; *Lincoln* (1815); *Edgbaston* (1816), 4; *Ayr* (1817), 8-10; *Select York* (1818), iii-iv; DCRO, D/HH/10/2/1 Barnard Castle Book Club Records, 1; BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 8 Book Society of Twelve, 1819; *Haworth* (1820), 11-14; BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 5 (62); *Ludlow* (1823), 13-14; BODJJ, Circulating Library Labels Don e. 267 aab0305 Deritend and Bordesley Book Club 1827; BOD, MS. Top. Gloucestershire d. 1 Dursley Reading Society Purchases 1819-32; *Doncaster* (1829). 11 of these membership lists are for Scottish associations and 39 are for English associations. 17 of the associations called themselves a book club (or derivative); 33 called themselves subscription libraries.

³⁹ Clark, *Clubs*, 191; see also St Clair, *Nation*, 250.

⁴⁰ Clark, *Clubs*, 199-201.

⁴¹ See page 137.

⁴² WCRO, CR304 Shipston-upon-Stour Reading Society Rules 1828.

be a charitable attempt to limit the expenditure of single women, and was thus supporting their access, whilst differentiating them from ordinary subscribers. At the Lancaster Amicable Society, 'those Ladies who are already Subscribers to the Society, may have the Privilege of continuing so, without becoming Proprietors'.⁴³ Similarly, it was construed a 'privilege' at Ludlow Library that women could vote by written notices rather than in person.⁴⁴ At the Dalkeith Library, the women were 'exempt from the trouble of office-bearing'.⁴⁵ This language couches these limitations as favourable concessions to women.

Special dispensations were given for women, which certainly differentiated, if not constrained their involvement in society meetings. At the Hull Subscription Library, 'No person shall be admitted into the gallery, (except ladies) during the holding of a General Meeting'.⁴⁶ In the Exeter Library Society, special provision was made for the distribution of reviews to the ladies of the society after they had been in the library room for one month, perhaps implying that women should or did not come to the library room itself.⁴⁷ Similarly, the librarian was instructed to 'write out for every Lady that is a subscriber' a list of books purchased each year, suggesting that they did not attend the meetings at which such decisions were made.⁴⁸ The minutes of most reading societies did not list women in their record of attendees, suggesting that they were either absent, or it was conventional not to recognise their participation.⁴⁹ One exception to this is the Dursley Reading Society, the minutes of which record the frequent participation of their female members within meetings. At the annual meeting in 1822, every motion was either proposed or seconded by a woman.⁵⁰ Similarly, in the Sedbergh Book Club, 'ladies are liable to no forfeits for non attendance'.⁵¹ Whilst this may seem to subtly encourage their absence, it renders their attendance normative. The smaller scale of book clubs perhaps made them a more accessible environment for women's involvement in decision-making, or at least their smaller memberships made women more visible within their records.

⁴³ *A Catalogue of the Amicable Society's Library in Lancaster* (Lancaster, 1794), 7.

⁴⁴ *Ludlow* (1823), 6.

⁴⁵ *Dalkeith* (1798), 4.

⁴⁶ Crosse, *Account*, Rules, 2.

⁴⁷ DA, Z19/41/1 Exeter Library Society Minutes 1777-1789, 2.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁹ E.g. HHC, UDSDL/3 Hull Subscription Library Minutes; ACL, 027.441 Air Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776 -1830; PWDRO, 3436/X62 Tavistock Public Subscription Library Records.

⁵⁰ BOD, MS. Top. Gloucestershire f. 1 Dursley Reading Society Minutes 1821-34, 2-4.

⁵¹ CAC, WPR/59/2 Sedbergh Book Club, 19.

Outside of associational business, women were clearly involved in reading association sociability. The Tavistock Library's visitors' book shows that women frequented the library premises: sometimes with male relatives, such as when Mr and Miss Travers, or Mr and Miss Jones attended, but often alone, such as Miss Branching, Mrs Keen, Mrs Mitchell, Miss Guest, and Miss Sarah and Elizabeth Hearte.⁵² 'Ladies and Gentlemen' were invited to scientific lectures held at the Hull Subscription Library.⁵³ Henry Crabb Robinson recollected that a Royston Book Club meeting in 1796, which he described as 'a tea-party' and 'a regular debate', was attended by 44 men and 42 ladies.⁵⁴ Caroline Francis Cornwallis wrote of attending her book society's sale, and Dorothy Wordsworth went to the Kendal Book Club 'to look at the last Reviews'.⁵⁵ Once again, the detailed accounts of the Dursley Reading Society illuminate the attendance of women at their anniversary breakfasts: in 1821, five women were each charged three shillings for their food, and both Miss Biddulph and Miss Ankers brought a visitor along.⁵⁶ Furthermore, George Vizard was charged for 'Mrs Vizard's Breakfast' and 'Mrs G Vizard's forfeits', showing that his wife participated in both sociability and book borrowing, despite not being a member.⁵⁷

Whilst some associations formally restricted women's involvement, most obviously through legislation about proxy voting, women have nonetheless been shown to have participated in governance, auctions, reading and feasting, and were more visible in the records of book clubs than subscription libraries. The limited records of women's experiences within reading associations make it hard to establish the tenor of their involvement within the society. The Roseland Book Club's anniversary meeting, comprising male and female members, was lauded by Richard Polwhele as 'such elegance and refined enjoyment', which he contrasted to 'the too frequent scenes of uproar, profaneness, and vulgarity', thus deploying language which resonated with ideas of women's civilising influence.⁵⁸ However,

⁵² PWDRO, 3436/X62 Tavistock Public Subscription Library Records, March-September 1823.

⁵³ *The Hull Packet and Original Weekly Commercial, Literary and General Advertiser*, Dec. 3, 1811, Issue 1299.

⁵⁴ *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson, Barrister-at-Law, F.S.A.*, ed. T. Sadler, 2 Vols (London, 1872), i. 21.

⁵⁵ *Selections from the Letters of Caroline Frances Cornwallis* (London, 1864), 482; *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Volume II*, ed. E. D. Selincourt, and rev. by M. Moorman (Oxford, 1969), 366.

⁵⁶ BOD, MS. Top. Gloucestershire d. 1 Dursley Reading Society Purchases 1819-28.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 19, 36.

⁵⁸ R. Polwhele, *The Language, Literature, and Literary Characters, of Cornwall: with Illustrations from Devonshire* (London, 1806), 98.

other sources depicted women's involvement in reading associations in less ornamental terms. Her sister's diary recorded that Harriet Grove, as president of the Yeovil Book Society, outbid the secretary at the book sale, challenging his independence by her display of her financial power.⁵⁹ Anne Lister recorded in her own diary that she had made an arrangement with the Halifax Circulating Library's librarian, paying him ten shillings a year to provide her with extra books.⁶⁰ This meant that when she was offered membership of a book society, founded because 'it was so long before they could get popular new works from the Halifax Library', she turned it down because 'I have no difficulty of this sort'.⁶¹ In 1797, *The Times* carried an anecdote about the wife of a physician who took the book club's bookseller 'to task' for failing to acquire a book they had ordered. The newspaper described this 'impatient' woman as 'fully competent to the business she had undertaken'.⁶² These representations of women's participation in reading associations displayed them as accomplished women, negotiating power structures for maximum participation within the community.

In contrast to the earlier examples of institutions which limited the involvement of women, some associations involved women in official capacities, providing them with experience of management and leadership. The Lancaster Amicable Society's rules carefully referred to the librarian as 'his or her', showing they were amenable to a woman holding the role.⁶³ In at least six reading associations, women were the librarian: Mrs Robinson was librarian of the Leeds Circulating Library in 1785; Mrs Chorlton was the librarian of the Manchester Circulating Library in 1794; Miss Jane Reid was elected librarian to the Ayr Library Society in 1806; Mrs Cordingley was recorded as the librarian of the Leeds New Subscription Library; Mrs Astill was the librarian of the Uxbridge Book Society; and Mrs Ware hosted the Exeter Library for Young Persons.⁶⁴ The Manchester Circulating Library outlined Mrs Chorlton's responsibilities, including distribution and repair of the books, dealing with

⁵⁹ *The Grove Diaries: The Rise and Fall of an English Family 1809-1925*, ed. D. Hawkins (Wimborne, 1995), 152.

⁶⁰ *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*, ed. H. Whitbread (London, 2010), 128.

⁶¹ *Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*, 160.

⁶² *The Times*, Feb. 1, 1797, Issue 3308.

⁶³ *A Catalogue of the Amicable Society*, 7.

⁶⁴ *Leeds* (1785), 97; *Manchester* (1794), 73; ACL, 027.441 Air Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776-1830, 32, and *Brief Historical Reminiscences of the County and Town of Ayr* (Ayr, 1830), 108; *The Leeds Intelligencer and Yorkshire General Advertiser*, October 22, 1821; G. Redford and T. H. Riches, *The History of the Ancient Town and Borough of Uxbridge* (Uxbridge, 1818), 139; *Exeter* (1808), 1.

finances and payments, and producing 'just and clear accounts'.⁶⁵ This was a position of significant responsibility, demanding financial accountability and organisational skills, clearly indicating that these women were not silent or honorary participants in literary associationalism. In the Dursley Reading Society, founded in 1818, Miss Weight was the secretary, and attended meetings along with Miss Ankers, Mrs White and Mrs Pruen.⁶⁶ Whilst this research does not suggest that women were regularly placed in positions of authority within associations, it shows that this was a viable position on the spectrum of women's involvement. In comparison to the image of the virtuous domestic woman, women who participated in associational management were displaying a range of public, professional capabilities.

In acting as reading association officers, women were in effect becoming part of the business world of print. The print industry was a growth area in this period, and it seems to have been accessible to women, albeit as a small proportion of the overall workforce.⁶⁷ It has been noted that the wives of printers and booksellers sometimes ran circulating libraries, with 20 female circulating library owners being recorded in Birmingham.⁶⁸ It is often assumed that women who worked in the print trades had inherited their businesses, usually as widows, but sometimes as daughters of printers and booksellers.⁶⁹ Conversely, the majority of the associational librarians noted above do not seem to have any connection to local booksellers, meaning that associations provided an opportunity for amateur women to

⁶⁵ *Manchester* (1794), 73-79.

⁶⁶ BOD, MS. Top. Gloucestershire f.1 Dursley Reading Society Minutes 1821-34, 8-9.

⁶⁷ H. Barker, 'Women, Work and the Industrial Revolution: Female Involvement in the English Printing Trades, c. 1700-1840', in Barker and Chalus, *Gender*, 89; C. J. Mitchell, 'Women in the Eighteenth-Century Book Trades', in O. M. Brack Jr (ed.), *Writers, Books, and Trade: An Eighteenth-Century Miscellany for William B. Todd* (New York, 1994), 30-31.

⁶⁸ D. Fowler, 'Women in Towns as Keepers of the Word: The Example of Warwickshire during the 1780s to 1830s', in R. Sweet and P. Lane (eds), *Women and Urban Life in Eighteenth-Century England: 'On the Town'* (Aldershot, 2003), 169.

⁶⁹ Barker, 'Women', 91.

become involved in a trade with which they had no family connection.⁷⁰ Reading associations also employed women in a variety of traditional roles, thus becoming a place of business as well as an associational space. The Sheffield Library paid women to scour their rooms, clean their furniture, carry parcels and examine their books.⁷¹ Anne Lister likewise observed a woman washing the Halifax Circulating Library.⁷² The Ayr Library 'convened in the House of Mrs Limond' and, later, the [public] house of Mrs Mitchell.⁷³ The segregation of a 'masculine' associational world and a feminised domestic sphere is clearly unsustainable: women were involved in associational leadership, and were drawn into contact with the associations as business owners and workers. At the summit of their involvement were aristocratic patrons: after the death of Lady Murray, the Kelso Library wrote to her husband 'acknowledging the favours of Lady Murray to our Library, and desiring the continuance of them on his part'.⁷⁴

A second element of associational life was women's involvement as readers. To what extent did mixed-sex reading communities problematise prescriptions for gendered reading, and were women's reading choices seen as a disruption to associational decision-making? There are very few remaining records which give a clear picture of gender patterns in relation to associational borrowings. Vivienne Dunstan, in her analysis of the borrowings from the

⁷⁰ Using the British Book Trade Index, <http://www.bbti.bham.ac.uk>; the Scottish Book Trade Index, <http://www.nls.uk/catalogues/scottish-book-trade-index>; The English Short Title Catalogue, <http://estc.bl.uk>; and The Library History Database, <http://www.r-alston.co.uk>. There were no plausible entries relating to Mrs Ware, and no Wares in the Exeter booktrade listings in DA, DIR/1823 *Pigot's London and Provincial New Commercial Directory 1823-4*, 214-224. The only records of Devon Wares are John and G. A. Ware as booksellers in Exeter in 1851 and 1866 respectively, perhaps offspring of Mrs Ware: I. Maxted, *The Devon Book Trades: A Biographical Dictionary* (Exeter, 1991). In the BBTI there was a Mancunian 'print cutter' with the surname of Chorlton in 1797, who would have been contemporaneous with Mrs Chorlton of the Manchester Circulating Library. There were no book trade-related Chorltons in the local directory (*Scholes's Manchester and Salford Directory* (Manchester, 1794)). There was a Halifax printer by the name of Cordingley in the 1760s (BBTI), and Alston records a Cordingley's Circulating Library in Halifax in 1768, although it is by no means certain that this was the forebear of the Mrs Cordingley of Leeds many decades later. There were no book-trade related Cordingleys in the local directory for 1822 (E. Baines, *History, Directory & Gazetteer of the County of York*, 2 Vols (1822-1823), i.). There was a bookseller in Paisley in the 1780s called Robert Reid, and a printer and bookseller in Glasgow called William Reid from the 1790s. The Ayrshire local directory does not list any Reids in connection to the book trade: *Brief Historical Reminiscences of the County and Town of Ayr* (Ayr, 1830). There are no relevant Astills in the BBTI. Mrs Robinson of the Leeds Library was noted as part of the bookselling and circulating library partnership of John and Mary Robinson of Leeds from 1786-1806 (BBTI). Allan's suggestion that female librarians were selected because they were already involved in the book trade does not seem to explain the majority of these instances: Allan, *Nation*, 114.

⁷¹ SCA, SLPS 215 Sheffield Library Account Book 1818-1825, 8, 24, 55.

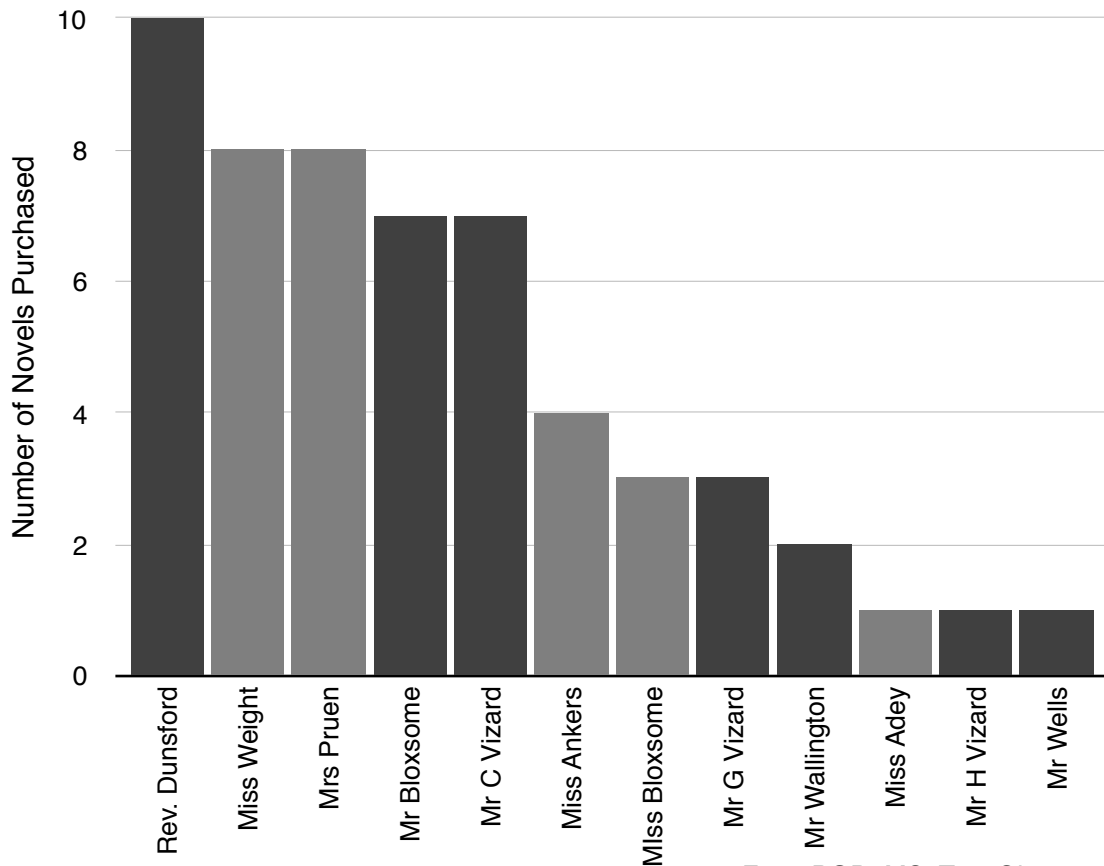
⁷² *Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*, 46.

⁷³ ACL, 027.441 Air Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776-1830, 1, 32; Two Mrs Mitchells were listed as innkeepers in Ayr in *Brief Historical Reminiscences of the County and Town of Ayr* (Ayr, 1830), 172.

⁷⁴ *Diary of George Ridpath, Minister of Stichel, 1755-1761*, ed. J. Balfour Paul (Edinburgh, 1922), 283; B. C. Murison, 'Baillie, George, of Jerviswood (1664-1738)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com> [1 March 2016].

free public library in Haddington from 1732-1816, concluded that female borrowers preferred fiction and poetry, whereas men favoured history and travel.⁷⁵ Towsey noted that five women borrowers together accounted for 150 of the 898 book loans at the Wigtown Subscription Library between 1796 and 1799, suggesting that they took particular advantage of their institutional access to literature.⁷⁶

5.2 Purchases of Novels in the Dursley Reading Society, 1819-1832



From BOD, MS. Top. Gloucestershire d.1

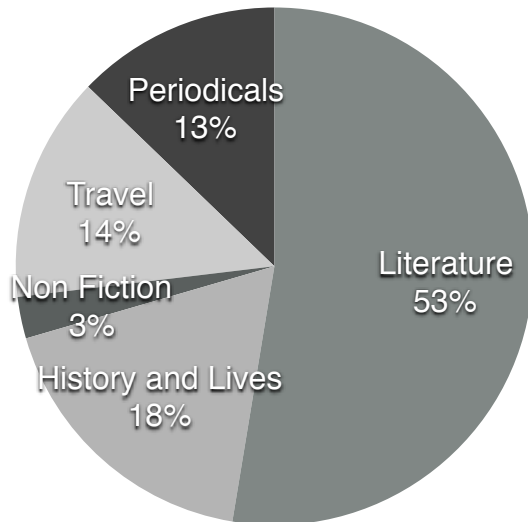
The only source within my dataset which allows a comparison of men's and women's reading practices within reading associations are the records of the Dursley Reading Society, which detail who purchased the books after they had circulated through the society. The accounts of 20 members have been analysed, through the period 1819-1832, amounting to the purchase of 369 works. Bar Chart 5.2 shows that the purchases of the 55 novels acquired by the association do not follow the feminized picture of novel consumption, for the

⁷⁵ V. Dunstan, 'Reading Habits in Scotland circa 1750-1820', Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2010, 94.

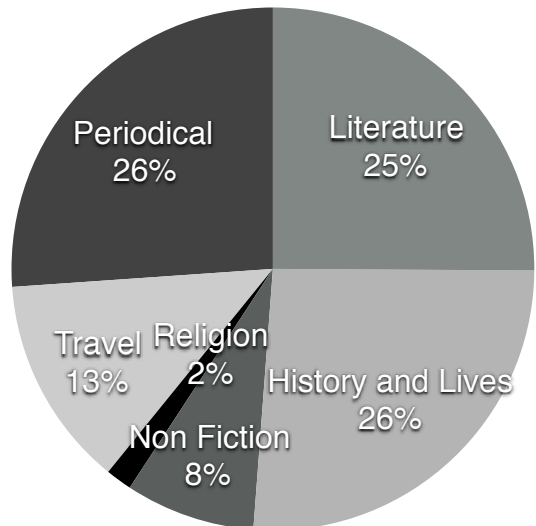
⁷⁶ Towsey, *Reading*, 65.

Reverend Dunsford purchased the most, followed by Miss Weight and Mrs Pruen, and then Mr Bloxsome and Mr Charles Vizard in joint-third place.

5.3 Dursley Women's Purchases by Genre



5.4 Dursley Men's Purchases by Genre



Pie Charts 5.3 and 5.4 show the overall statistics of male and female purchases, divided into genre categories of literature; history; non-fiction; religion; travel; and periodicals.⁷⁷ The biggest difference in their purchasing patterns was that women predominantly purchased literature (including novels, poetry, and miscellaneous works), whereas men purchased history and lives, and literature in almost equal proportions. All of these works would have been circulated to all society members prior to being sold, so this analysis does not show that women were the predominant *readers* of fictional works, but that they were more likely to *purchase* fictional works after communal use. The Dursley women's preference for literature conforms to contemporary and historiographical perceptions, although whether their purchases were due to individual tastes within these small samples, or the effectiveness of wider conventions of gendered reading, is impossible to say. Beyond their link with fictional reading, this research also shows that women were able and willing to

⁷⁷ The seven female members made a total of 78 purchases between them; the 13 men purchased 291 works between them. I used the titles and additional bibliographical information from Worldcat, www.worldcat.org and the British Fiction Database 1800-1829, <http://www.british-fiction.cf.ac.uk> to determine the genre of the work.

acquire works from all of the categories, excluding the negligible 'religion' category which comprised only four texts. There is a broad pattern in both charts which illustrates that nineteenth-century associational readers preferred narrative and literary texts, with a secondary interest in travel genres, and finally a low level of interest in scientific or religious works. As a preliminary study, this research indicates that men and women benefited equally from the range of works offered to them by the associations, rather than being confined to subject areas which suited their sex. There was no strict delineation of gendered literature within library catalogues, or in reading preferences; rather, injunctions about buying 'proper' works safeguarded the morality of all readers, regardless of gender.

III. The Association and the Home

This chapter does not only seek to reinstate women into the associational environment as readers, leaders and workers. Instead, it argues that the home was integral to associational practice. The home was the counterpart of the association, as it was the place where books were actually read. In addition, the 'household' had a significant meaning to reading associations, as a borrowing unit. From this, an emphasis on familial participation and inheritance developed, which inscribed 'domestic' significations onto 'public' associationalism. Amanda Vickery notes that 'home-based sociability' problematises the idea of the private home as demarcated from the public outdoors; similarly, this research delves into associational use of the home space, reiterating that the 'masculine' and 'public' qualities of reading associations should not be overemphasised.⁷⁸

This analysis of the domestic ideology of reading associations opens up an entirely new way of understanding eighteenth and early-nineteenth century clubs, as formations which drew their structures, morals and reading patterns from the home. The relationship

⁷⁸ Vickery, *Daughter*, 202.

between club practice and domestic life has only been examined by one historian in a very recent publication: Ina Ferris' *Book-Men, Book Clubs and the Romantic Literary Sphere*. In this work, Ferris acknowledges that books were read by and within the extended family of book club members.⁷⁹ She examines the case of John Marsh, showing that his book club was 'aligned with the domestic space' by meeting and eating at the homes of members.⁸⁰ She suggests this was part of a broad cultural shift in which clubs moved from taverns to the home, emphasising that many of these changes occurred after 1800; but this chapter will show the involvement of the domestic sphere in club matters long before this. Furthermore, Ferris' study is predicated on the specificity of rural book-club practice, arguing this was a 'hybrid' form of metropolitan-local culture, which did not adhere to the concerns of aspirational politeness which animated urban associations. Ferris argues that Marsh quickly dropped out of a local library society (aligned with 'urban' models), instead preferring the 'particular kind of sociability' that the book club offered: but were there such stark contrasts between the sociable (and domestic) practices of book clubs and subscription libraries?⁸¹ By examining a wider range of aspects of 'domesticity' in reading associations, including not only how associational practices spilled over into the home, but also how domestic and family life were consciously implicated in the legislation and membership of the society itself, I show that even urban institutions encouraged the duality of club and home life. This problematises Ferris' alignment of rural book-club sociability with a rejection of urban politeness, and instead suggests a need to recast urban politeness as a more ambiguous and traditionalist project. Furthermore, Ferris argues that Marsh's book club was absorbed into the domestic sphere, showing the 'precariousness of intermediate zones within a culture'.⁸² Rather than positing a collapse of association into the home, I suggest that these were symbiotic and parallel organisations. These cultural realms were multifaceted and interdependent, building associational superstructures upon the most basic, face-to-face units of familial organisation.

The family had long had a symbolic significance as a microcosm of the state and of patriarchal order, and Hunt argues that it became a 'constitutive feature of eighteenth-century

⁷⁹ Ferris, *Book-men*, 116-117.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 154.

life' as a site of middle-class virtue.⁸³ Despite men's ideological significance as head of the household, women were accorded significant agency in cultural terms, in arenas such as decorating, receiving guests, and educating children. In line with the separate spheres ideology, women are considered to have had more authority and independence as mistress of the household than they did in any other venue, which was bolstered by the eighteenth-century cultural emphasis on feminised taste, sociability, and consumption.⁸⁴ Nonetheless, the responsibilities and roles of men and women were negotiated and variable, and men's contribution to and appreciation of their household is being reintegrated into the historical narrative.⁸⁵ As well as their conceptual significance as head of the household, it is argued that the discourse of oeconomy made household management an integral component of masculine identity.⁸⁶ Tosh has argued that the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity fulfilled men's needs for order and love in the face of social and economic change.⁸⁷ The position of the household as a symbol of a female, private sphere is thus under question. Van Horn Melton argues that households 'connected the public and the private realms', and Davidoff and Hall suggests that family 'mediated' between the spheres.⁸⁸ Men's public roles were predicated on their household principles, and their family's assistance, making their participation outside of their home dependent on their connections within it.⁸⁹ Following these insights, this chapter will elaborate upon the significance of the household as a foundation and twin of 'public' associational activities.

Firstly, it was expected that library books would be read in the members' homes. Most reading associations did not have dedicated library premises, and even those which did announced that 'the Subscribers shall read the Books at their own Houses, and not in the Library-Room'.⁹⁰ Once the book was in the home, reading associations accepted that it was likely to be shared amongst members of the household, either by reading together or passing it around. Prohibitions on lending library books often specified penalties for those who lent

⁸³ Hunt, *Middling Sort*, 198.

⁸⁴ A. Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (London, 2009), 7, 100.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 10, 52.

⁸⁶ Harvey, *Little Republic*.

⁸⁷ Tosh, *A Man's Place*, 50.

⁸⁸ J. Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge, 2001), 15; Davidoff and Hall, *Family*, 32.

⁸⁹ McCormack, *Independent Man*; Davidoff and Hall, *Family*, 33; K. Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens: Women, Gender and Political Culture in Britain, 1815-1867* (Oxford, 2009).

⁹⁰ *Liverpool* (1760), 8. See also WYAS, MISC:5/96C/79 Proposals for Establishing a Circulating Library in Halifax, 6.

library books 'out of his own family'.⁹¹ Furthermore, the family seems to have become synonymous with the household space, because even more institutions used this term to frame acceptable reading patterns: 'No Subscriber shall lend or suffer to be lent out of his own House' or 'dwelling-house' was a common formulation.⁹² As well as indicating that non-family members were not to read the book, the household was further emphasised as the appropriate reading environment, for members were not even to permit the books to be taken out of their houses.⁹³ At the Kelso Library, country members were expressly forbidden from leaving their books in any house in Kelso, unless it was 'the house of a proprietor'.⁹⁴ Presumably, this shows that the books were perceived as the private property of the members: to permit that property to enter the residence of a non-member was both foolish and inappropriate.

Similarly, a law of the Bristol Library Society proclaimed that 'no Person keeping a Lodging-House, Inn, Tavern, Coffee-House, or any other Place of Public Entertainment' was allowed to become a library member.⁹⁵ Whilst there was a practical reason for this, namely the implication that society books might be used in such places by a parade of paying customers, this further contributed to the signification of reading and associational membership as activities for the private individual, in the private home. The private house as the locus of reading association membership was most clearly indicated by the unusual edict of the Macclesfield Subscription Library, which allowed that 'any Member being from Home, a relation or visitant, residing in his House, shall be entitled with his written permission, to go or send for Books'.⁹⁶ This configured the house as the subscribing unit: when its original occupants were away, subsequent ones had their library privileges.

⁹¹ Crosse, *Account*, Rules, 6; Montrose Library Rules, in *The Gentleman's Magazine: and, Historical Chronicle*, Vol. 55, Part II (London, 1785), 535; *Stamford* (1787), 8; *York Book Society* (1797), 6; *A Catalogue of the Books in the Library of the Hackney Literary Institution* (Hackney, 1816), 4; *Kirkcudbright* (1824), 2; WCRO, CR304 Shipston-upon-Stour Reading Society Rules 1828.

⁹² *Kelso* (1790), 70; HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library Laws, 2; *Macclesfield* (1796), 35; *Dalkeith* (1798), 11; *Oxford* (1809), 1; *Glasgow* (1810), xiv; *Lincoln* (1814), 13; *Whitby* (1814), 4; *Dursley* (1818), 4; *Edinburgh* (1823), 10; *Ludlow* (1823), 6; *Dudley* (1826), ix; *Doncaster* (1829), 13; WCRO, CR0229/Box12/1 Miscellaneous Ettington Book Club Records, *Rules of the Eatington Book Club*, 9; *Tavistock* (1839), 65; BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 3 (2), Circulating Libraries Box 3 (44), Circulating Libraries Box 5 (64).

⁹³ *Dursley* (1818), 4.

⁹⁴ *Kelso* (1790), 73.

⁹⁵ *Bristol* (1790), 8.

⁹⁶ *Macclesfield* (1796), 37.

Given the proportion of male subscribers to reading associations, it is usually their dependent women and children who would have benefited from the sharing of library books in the home. Yet the terminology of the 'household' did not always come with the connotations of male house ownership: both the Dursley Reading Society and the Tavistock Subscription Library referred to 'his or her' house.⁹⁷ The Ashton-under-Lyne circulating library advertisement was addressed to 'the heads of families in general, and of all thinking and reading persons in particular'.⁹⁸ Whilst this primarily focused on the head of the household, it accepted that other 'persons' would also be interested and acceptable. At the Tavistock Subscription Library, it was specified that 'the Husbands of such Ladies as are Subscribers' would be admitted to the library rooms, thus admitting that men's access to this associational space was mediated through their wives.⁹⁹ The significance of the 'household' as a lending unit did not necessarily prioritise the masculine 'householder' and this physical seat of his authority, but construed the household as the heart of the family.¹⁰⁰ Naturally, this emphasis on the household ties into the broadly 'propertied' nature of the literate, local elites who formed these associations.

Beyond the discourse which linked reading to the home, and library membership as the prerogative of an entire household, the 'private', domestic space was implicated in associational practice in other ways. In particular, book clubs sometimes met in members' homes, thus eliding the public and the private spheres.¹⁰¹ The Eclectic Book Society meetings were held in members' homes, and members were often thanked for 'the extreme liberality manifested in their reception and entertainment of the Society'; their location in the city of London proves that this was not simply a rural practice.¹⁰² Other societies, both clubs and subscription libraries, rented a room in a member's house for the storage of their

⁹⁷ *Dursley* (1818), 4; *Tavistock* (1839), 65.

⁹⁸ *Ashton-under-Lyne Circulating Library* (Manchester, 1803).

⁹⁹ *Tavistock* (1839), 67.

¹⁰⁰ Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, 26 similarly argues that the vote was seen as the 'family property' of the household rather than just its male leader.

¹⁰¹ e.g. CAC, WPR/59/2 Sedbergh Book Club, 2; *Newton* (1814), 3. In 1796 Greenock began to meet in the library rather than the house of James Stewart: WLA, WA1/1/1/1 Greenock Library Minute Book 1794-1815, 3. The Chichester Book Society met in the steward's home: *The John Marsh Journals: The Life and Times of a Gentleman Composer (1752-1828)*, ed. B. Robins (Stuyvesant, 1998), 452. Arthur Jessop notes that his book club met at Arthur Hudson's, Daniel Thorpe's, William Shackleton's, etc, presumably meaning their homes: *Two Yorkshire Diaries. The Diary of Arthur Jessop and Ralph Ward's Journal*, ed. C. E. Whiting (The Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series, Vol. CXVII, 1952).

¹⁰² LMA, CLC/064/MS00988A The Eclectic Book Society Minute Book 1812-1820, 24; Ferris, *Book-Men*, 109-129.

books.¹⁰³ The books themselves were a mobile embodiment of the reading association, a pocket of public life which intruded upon the home. In a letter to Thomas Pringle in 1828, Samuel Taylor Coleridge referred to a volume 'passing it's book-club course thro' our house', showing that books opened up the domestic environment to associational patterns.¹⁰⁴

Diaries and letters show how this relationship between public association and private home was experienced by members. John Marsh, a musician, was instrumental in the formation of the Chichester Book Society and the Chichester Library Society.¹⁰⁵ In his diary, he described himself and his wife as 'great readers', and it is clear that they both benefited from the books he acquired through his reading associations.¹⁰⁶ He took two society books with him when travelling with his family in 1795. After he had finished 'Moritz's *Travels in England*', his son John read it; and Marsh was prevented from reading his other book, 'Jackson's *30 Letters*', because his wife was reading it.¹⁰⁷ On another occasion, Marsh noted that 'Mrs M and I began reading' a novel which he had just got from the Library.¹⁰⁸ Marsh's diary thus suggests that his associational books were read (aloud) collectively with family members, as well as being separately borrowed by other family members for solitary reading. Jane Austen similarly portrayed library books being read in a domestic setting, when writing to Cassandra Austen in 1798: 'My father is now reading the "Midnight Bell", which he has got from the library, and mother sitting by the fire'.¹⁰⁹ In an even more intimate portrait of domestic life, George Ridpath, a Scottish minister, often recorded in his diary that he had 'slept on' a book from the Kelso Library, presumably indicating that he took it with him to bed.¹¹⁰ He also referred to reading a library book 'in bed in the morning'.¹¹¹ Personal records thus indicate that reading association books became embedded in domestic scenes, being shared amongst family members in sociable environments or even being taken to the bed-chamber. People also encountered reading association books in others' homes. Ridpath saw

¹⁰³ Crosse, *Account*, 5; DA, Z19/41/1 Exeter Library Society Minutes 1777-1789, October 1785; CAC, WPR/59/1A Kendal Book Club Rules, 6.

¹⁰⁴ *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 6 Vols (Oxford, 2000), ii. 733.

¹⁰⁵ *John Marsh Journals* (Stuyvesant, 1998), 450, 562.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 536.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 583.

¹⁰⁸ *The John Marsh Journals: The Life and Times of a Gentleman Composer (1752-1828) Volume II*, ed. B. Robins (Hillsdale, 2013), 3.

¹⁰⁹ *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. D. Le Faye, Third edn (Oxford, 1997), 15.

¹¹⁰ *Ridpath*, 65, 102, 318.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

the third volume of Sully's memoirs, a library book, when visiting his friend Robert's home.¹¹² In 1802, Coleridge read Sotheby's translation of Virgil's *Georgics* 'at a Friend's House in the Neighbourhood - and on sending for the book I find that it belonged to a Book Club, & has been returned'.¹¹³ The household as a 'private' reading environment was thus a heterogenous and fluid site which exposed associational books to family, visiting book club members and neighbours.

Personal sources also illuminate the practices of the reading association community beyond their formal meetings. Amongst the diarists examined here, a common pattern is that they travelled to association meetings with other members. In January 1779 John Ludford 'went to Coleshill Book Club and took Mr & Mrs Sadler in my Postchaise with me'.¹¹⁴ John Marsh shared a postchaise to the Chichester Book Society with Sir Brisbane,¹¹⁵ William Johnson Temple rode with Mr George to the Truro Library committee meetings,¹¹⁶ Arthur Jessop rode with Mr Tinker to the Holmfirth Book Club,¹¹⁷ William Holland walked or rode to the Stowey Book Club with various members over time,¹¹⁸ James Oakes arrived at Ixworth Book Club 'in Mr Adamson's Chaise',¹¹⁹ and Benjamin Newton took Mr Carter to the Bedale Book Club in his barouche.¹²⁰ This companionable travel to and from meetings would presumably have involved collecting others from their homes, bringing association members together not only in meetings but in shared patterns of travel.

In addition, many of the diarists noted hospitality shared between members after association meetings. Ridpath 'lodged' at the house of a book club member in Kelso after a library meeting in 1755, along with other members.¹²¹ In 1779, Ludford brought Richard Astley back to Ansley Hall after a book club meeting.¹²² Marsh noted that after a book club meeting in 1799, a new member 'came over & for the 1st. time dined with us since his being

¹¹² Ibid., 60. See also 235.

¹¹³ *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ii. 812.

¹¹⁴ WCRO, CR2795/3 Ludford Journal, 4.

¹¹⁵ *John Marsh Journals Volume II* (Hillsdale, 2013), 334.

¹¹⁶ *Diaries of William Johnston Temple, 1780-1796*, ed. L. Bettany (Oxford, 1929), 104, 115.

¹¹⁷ *Yorkshire Diaries*, 76, 78.

¹¹⁸ *Paupers and Pig Killers: The Diary of William Holland, A Somerset Parson 1799-1818*, ed. J. Ayres (Gloucester, 1984), 84, 97, 112, 203.

¹¹⁹ *The Oakes Diaries: Business, Politics and the Family in Bury St Edmunds 1778-1827*, ed J. Fiske, 2 Vols (Woodbridge, 1990-1991), i. 268.

¹²⁰ *The Diary of Benjamin Newton, Rector of Wath, 1816-1818*, ed. C. P. Fendall and E. A. Crutchley, (Cambridge, 1933), 256.

¹²¹ *Ridpath*, 38; membership list from Kelso (1790), 65-67.

¹²² WCRO, CR2795/3 Ludford Journal, 6.

elected a member & took his bed at my house'.¹²³ Holland noted that, at the Stowey Book Society dinner and auction in 1810, 'Mr Davis seemed very infirm. I had a bed ready for him at our house but he said he must go home'.¹²⁴ William Hardy attended a book club's dinner in Holt in 1797, and the diary of his Mother also recorded that 'Mr Ellis of Cley came home with him & Supt Here'.¹²⁵ When John Longe did not dine at the Coddtenham Book Club, 'Mr Phear dined there & called here in his way', suggesting that a club friend checked in on his absent compatriot, visiting him at home instead of meeting at their association.¹²⁶

These sources indicate a long-standing and otherwise invisible culture of hospitality amongst association members, in both rural book clubs and urban associations. After meals and meetings, it was not unusual for members to play host to others, who perhaps lived further away. This extended the sociability of a club meeting into the domestic setting, as members adjourned from associational environs of conviviality to domestic scenes of hospitality. Being in an association thus involved public participation in meetings and community activities, but also had implications for the home, and those, such as Hardy's mother, who managed the home. Reading was primarily to take place in the home; membership was conceived of as vested in a household, with the expectation that literature would be read and shared amongst the family; the circulation of reading association books and the rhythms of travel to associational meetings united those households as interlinked spaces; and the house could also be directly opened up as a venue for reading association meetings, or for the reception of guests after meetings. The public life of the reading association was a superstructure built upon the private home as the primary location of reading: the two spheres were interdependent and interlocking.

¹²³ *John Marsh Journals* (Stuyvesant, 1998), 731-732.

¹²⁴ *Paupers and Pig Killers*, 203.

¹²⁵ *The Diary of Mary Hardy 1773-1809*, ed. M. Bird, 4 Vols (Kingston-upon-Thames, 2013), iii. 332.

¹²⁶ *The Diary of John Longe (1765-1834) Vicar of Coddtenham*, ed. M. Stone (Woodbridge, 2008), 90.

IV. The Association and the Family

In addition to the discursive and practical import of the home in associational practice, this chapter also argues for the importance of families within reading associations. Often, it has been presumed that family members were silent reading association participants, reading associational texts in the home.¹²⁷ Allan argues that women are invisible within the associations' records, as they usually benefited vicariously, and only joined reading associations if they did not have a male relative who already subscribed, because 'at many institutions... there are no instances of female subscribers sharing a surname with the men'.¹²⁸ Instead, this chapter will show that multiple family members participated in reading associations: 36% of the women in my sample attended institutions alongside presumed kin.¹²⁹ The implications of family participation have hardly been remarked upon by historians of reading associations, despite the new light which it casts on this supposedly 'masculine' environment.¹³⁰ Associations were a forum in which familial relationships were displayed in a semi-public fashion, with parents and children or husbands and wives attending together. Amanda Vickery calculated that over one-third of social interactions recorded by an eighteenth-century provincial woman involved kin, and this chapter demonstrates that kin were also involved in 'public' forms of sociability.¹³¹ Furthermore, the inheritance and transfer of shares shows that associational participation united successive generations of the same family, consolidating their position within the local community and helping to sustain traditions of commemoration.

¹²⁷ e.g. Allan, *Nation*, 82; Towsey, *Reading*, 65.

¹²⁸ D. Allan, "The Advantages of Literature": The Subscription Library in Georgian Britain', in A. Crawford (ed.), *The Meaning of the Library: A Cultural History* (Oxford, 2015), 112.

¹²⁹ There were 359 women in these 50 institutions (See Table 5.1), of which 131 appeared in membership lists alongside someone else with the same surname.

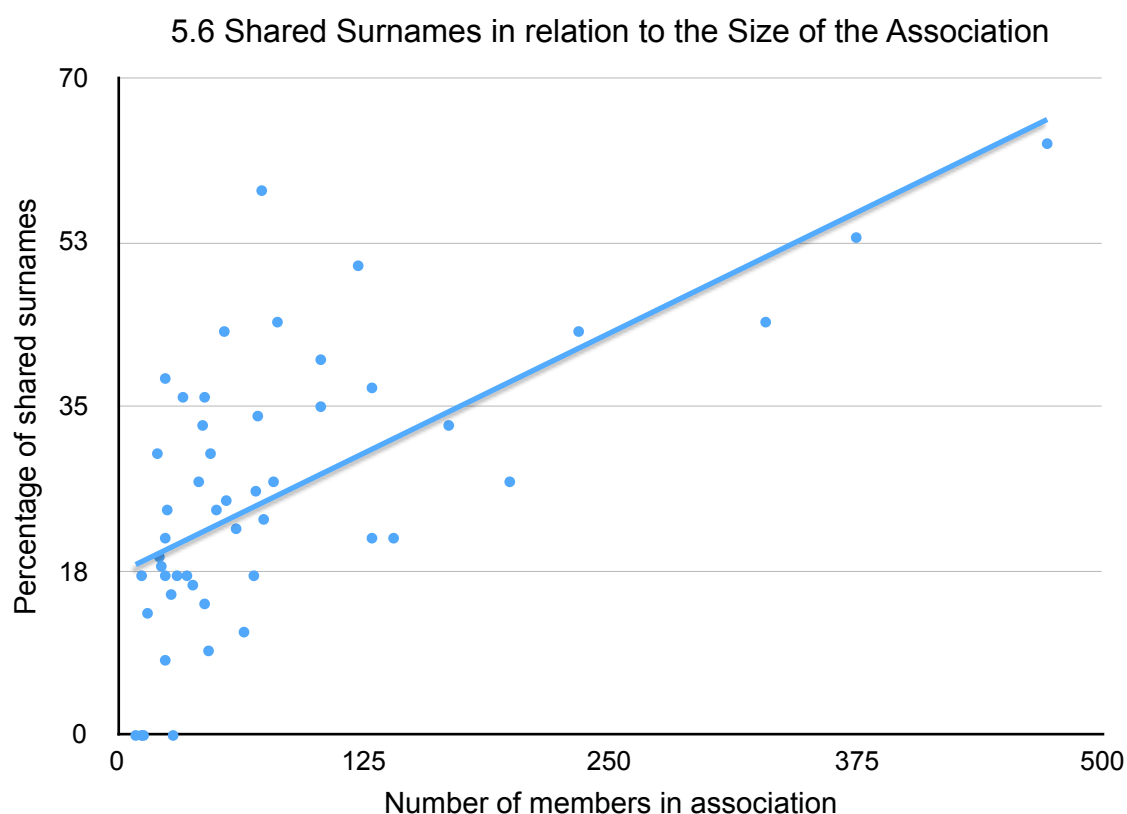
¹³⁰ Allan, *Nation*, 80 moves swiftly from discussion of women who attended the association without kinship connections to the invisible women who benefited from their kinsmen's associational membership.

¹³¹ Vickery, *Daughter*, 23.

5.5 Shared Surnames in Reading Associations, 1755-1829

Association	Date	Total members	Number of shared surnames	% of Members with Shared Surnames
Wye Book Club	1755	15	2	13
Liverpool Library	1760	140	29	21
Birmingham Book Society	1775	24	9	38
Whitby Subscription Library	1775	33	12	36
Exeter Library Society	1776	79	21	27
Hull Subscription Library	1776	69	12	17
Ayr Library Society	1777	47	14	30
Coleshill Book Club	1779	20	6	30
Macclesfield Circulating Library	1779	22	4	18
Sedbergh Book Club	1782	27	4	15
Halifax Circulating Library	1785	129	48	37
Leeds Circulating Library	1785	375	199	53
Stamford Subscription Library	1787	46	4	9
Duns Subscription Library	1789	54	23	43
Stamford Subscription Library	1789	60	13	22
Bristol Library Society	1790	168	55	33
Kelso Library	1790	71	24	34
Sedbergh Book Club	1790	28	0	0
Malton Subscription Library	1791	50	12	24
Huntingdon Book Club	1793	70	18	26
Manchester Circulating Library	1794	329	146	44
Wigtown Subscription Library	1795	44	6	14
Macclesfield Subscription Library	1796	64	7	11
Kilmarnock Public Library	1797	81	36	44
York Book Society	1797	28	0	0
Bristol Library Society	1798	199	53	27
Luddenden Circulating Library	1798	24	5	21
Ayr Library Society	1802	103	36	35
Greenock Library	1805	55	14	25
Sheffield Book Society	1806	30	5	17
Glasgow Public Library	1810	472	297	63
Tavistock Public Subscription Library	1810	25	6	24
Kilmarnock Public Library	1811	122	61	50
Eclectic Book Society	1813	12	2	17
Ayr, Newton, and Wallacetown Library	1814	35	6	17
Whitby Subscription Library	1814	43	14	33
Bampton Reading Society	1815	38	6	16
Lincoln Library	1815	234	101	43
Edgbaston and Five Ways Book Society	1816	24	4	17
Ayr Library Society	1817	103	41	40
Select Subscription Library York	1818	74	17	23
Barnard Castle Book Club	1819	13	0	0
Book Society of Twelve	1819	12	0	0
Haworth Subscription Library	1820	73	42	58
Sedbergh Book Club	1821	21	4	19
Guthlaxton Book Society	1823	9	0	0
Ludlow Library	1823	44	16	36
Deritend and Bordesley Book Club	1827	24	2	8
Dursley Reading Society (1819-1828)	1828	41	11	27
Doncaster Subscription Library	1829	129	27	21
Average before 1800				25
Average after 1800				26
Overall Average			29	25

I have analysed the same selection of membership lists, in order to examine the significance of familial relationships to the reading association community (see table 5.5).¹³² Overall, this analysis provides a general picture of the proportion of kin within each association. On average, 25% of reading association members shared a surname with other reading association members. At the Haworth Subscription Library, which had 73 members, 58% attended alongside their kin. The biggest family grouping here were the eleven members of the extended Greenwood family, stemming from the ten children of John and Ellen Greenwood.¹³³ In the Leeds Circulating Library, nine members of the Oates family attended: brothers Joseph, George and Frederick, alongside their uncle Josiah and his wife, another uncle Samuel and his son Samuel Hamer; and an unidentified Miss Oates.¹³⁴ Another large dynasty were the Harford family in the Bristol Library Society: cousins Joseph,



¹³² See page 173. I have calculated the percentage of members who had a surname in common with other members of their association. Closer analysis of some case studies indicated that many association members were linked by marriage rather than blood, which remains invisible when analysing surnames. This is counterbalanced by the fact that some of the shared surnames may be coincidental, rather than evidence of kinship.

¹³³ P. Laxton, 'Christopher Greenwood', on Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <http://www.oxforddnb.com>, [24 Aug 2015].

¹³⁴ R. G. Wilson, *Gentlemen Merchants: The Merchant Community in Leeds, 1700-1830* (Manchester, 1971), 246.

Edward and Mark Harford attended with their respective sons, Charles Joseph Harford, John Scandrett Harford and S. Lloyd Harford.¹³⁵ There was no marked change over time with regards to familial participation in associations: instead, the correlation is between the size of the institution and the proportion of shared surnames, as scatter graph 5.6 shows. Clearly, in book clubs with under twenty members, it was unlikely that many members of the same family would join. In larger-scale subscription libraries, however, it was not uncommon for multiple family members to subscribe, forming identifiable sub-groups within the community.

In 26 instances across these associations, men were members alongside their 'junior' of the same name. Diarists sometimes noted that they attended alongside their relatives: John Longe of Coddensham repeatedly noted that 'I & Mr Bacon [his brother-in-law] dined at the Club', and many years later he dined there with his own son.¹³⁶ James Oakes took his nephew to the Ixworth Book Club's annual dinner.¹³⁷ Women were sometimes part of the family groupings, with a single 'miss' amongst many men of the same surname suggesting a sister, although it is often difficult to find corroborating records about these women which could positively identify their relationship to men of the same surname. In Hull Subscription Library, Henry Carlile Broadley was a member alongside his brother Robert, his son Thomas, and his (presumed) daughter Miss Broadley.¹³⁸ Benjamin Pead and his sister Mrs Pead were original subscribers to the library.¹³⁹ Brothers Patrick and John Ballantine participated in the Ayr Library Society, alongside their married sister Elizabeth Fergusson.¹⁴⁰ In the Stamford Subscription Library, MP George Fludyer was a member alongside his brother and sister-in-law, Sir Samuel Brudenell and Lady Fludyer.¹⁴¹ Charlotte Grove recalled attending a book society meeting with her sister Harriet and her brother-in-law; he was their guest, as Harriet was the president.¹⁴² Fathers also attended alongside daughters: Anne Lister and her father

¹³⁵ P. Wakelin, 'Harford Family', on Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <http://www.oxforddnb.com>, [24 Aug 2015].

¹³⁶ *Diary of John Longe*, 8, 11, 14; 55.

¹³⁷ *The Oakes Diaries: Business, Politics and the Family in Bury St Edmunds 1778-1827*, ed J. Fiske, 2 Vols (Woodbridge, 1990-1991), ii. 135.

¹³⁸ B. Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic Dictionary of the Landed Gentry of Great Britain and Ireland*, Fourth edn, 2 Vols (London, 1862-1863), i. 153.

¹³⁹ *The Monthly Magazine; Or, British Register*, Vol. XII Part II for 1801 (London, 1801), 72.

¹⁴⁰ J. Paterson, *History of the County of Ayr: with a Genealogical Account of the Families of Ayrshire*, 2 Vols (Ayr, 1847-1852), i. 208.

¹⁴¹ J. A. Cannon, 'Fludyer, George (1761-1837)', on History of Parliament Online, <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org> [24 August 2015]; I. R. Christie, 'Fludyer, Sir Samuel Brudenell, 2nd Bt. (1759-1833)', on History of Parliament Online, <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org> [24 August 2015].

¹⁴² *Grove Diaries*, 152.

are both listed as Halifax Circulating Library members, and in her diary she recalls walking down to the library with him.¹⁴³ Mothers and daughters also seem to have subscribed to reading associations together: the 'misses Stevenson' were part of the Ayr Library in 1827, Mrs and Miss Merlott were members of Bristol Library Society in 1798, and Mrs and Miss Masterman were part of Malton Subscription Library in 1791, amongst others.¹⁴⁴ Daughters even appear to have inherited their mothers' shares: a Miss Elizabeth Pruen replaced Mrs Pruen in the Dursley Reading Society.¹⁴⁵ Spouses also subscribed individually to the same institution: the diarist George Ridpath and wife Mrs Ridpath were both members of the Kelso Subscription Library, and Sir William and Lady Maxwell were both subscribers to the Wigtown Subscription Library.¹⁴⁶

Clearly, reading associations could include a variety of familial relationships, with women subscribing personally despite being wives, sisters, daughters, and even widows.¹⁴⁷ This participation was not auxiliary membership, as historians have suggested, but official and visible subscription on equal terms with male family members. Women were even patrons alongside their husbands: Sir John and Lady Throckmorton headed the membership list of the Bampton Reading Society in 1815, and the Duke and Duchess of Bedford were the patrons of the Tavistock Subscription Library in 1839.¹⁴⁸ Husbands and wives thus symbolically headed these reading associations, configuring them as environments in which families participated as a unit. This was even expressed in associational discourse: a meeting of the Bristol Library Society in 1828 wished to alert the public to 'the benefit derivable to family circles, from having access to the valuable and well-selected collection it possesses'.¹⁴⁹ Mrs Cheney presented the Hull Subscription Library with a painting of 'Pliny the younger instructing his family', contributing to the visual iconography of institutions, which in this case encouraged a family-centred reading model.¹⁵⁰ Families were thus an important and visible component of reading association communities, and indeed reading and

¹⁴³ *Halifax* (1786), 70; *Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*, 46-47.

¹⁴⁴ *Ayr* (1802), 1827 Supplement, 52; *Bristol* (1798), xiii; HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library Laws, 7.

¹⁴⁵ BOD, MS. Top. Gloucestershire f. 1 Dursley Reading Society Minutes 1821-34, 5.

¹⁴⁶ *Ridpath; Kelso* (1790), 66; HL, MS 5/27 Wigtown Subscription Library, 2.

¹⁴⁷ WYAS, SPL236 Luddenden Circulating Library Records - Widow Patchett.

¹⁴⁸ BOD, G. Pamph. 540 (1) *A catalogue of the books of the Bampton Reading Society* (1815), 3; *Tavistock* (1839), 71.

¹⁴⁹ *The Bristol Mercury*, May 13, 1828, Issue 1987.

¹⁵⁰ *The Hull Packet and Original Weekly Commercial, Literary and General Advertiser*, Dec. 13, 1814, Issue 1468.

associational practice were normatively centred on the family and domestic environment. The 'male' associational sphere actually depended upon domestic environments, and contextualised men in a web of relationships with women and other family members. Families participated in the public life of their locality, and individuals did not leave these familial ties behind them, even in their 'public' activities.

The importance of family connections was also manifest in the regularity with which subscription library shares were passed on to family members. Shares were usually transferable as private property, and in case of a member's death were to be inherited, thus making familial transfers the default position.¹⁵¹ However, not all familial transfers were a matter of inheritance: the Exeter Library Society approved a transfer from Miss Bradford to her mother in 1784,¹⁵² and Samuel Cuthbert transferred his share in the Ayr Library to his mother in 1783.¹⁵³ 62 of the 204 original shares in the Plymouth Public Library, founded in 1813, were transferred to someone of the same surname, meaning an average of 30% of transfers thus went to apparent family members.¹⁵⁴ Of 35 shares in the Whitby Subscription Library, 14 were passed on to someone of the same surname between 1775 and 1814, representing a familial transfer rate of 40%.¹⁵⁵ Three of these transfers seem to have been from husband to wife.¹⁵⁶ Annotations on a membership list of the Ludlow Subscription Library modified five entries, to show that W. Adams was replaced by (his presumed wife) Mrs Adams; T. E. Hodges was replaced by Mrs Hodges; Mrs Meyricke replaced by Reverend Meyricke; J. B. Morris by G. Morris and T. McGhie by Miss McGhie.¹⁵⁷ Only two new names were added to the list, showing that a family transfer was more common than the introduction of an entirely new member. Clearly, different family members would take over reading association membership, their interest presumably having been piqued by their vicarious experience through family members.

Successive generations of library members provided a family with an ongoing identity and position within their local community. It also supported the rhetoric of reading

¹⁵¹ E.g. *Halifax* (1786), 63; HL, MS 5/27 Wigtown Subscription Library, 3; *Bristol* (1790), 5; *Macclesfield* (1796), 37.

¹⁵² DA, Z19/41/1 Exeter Library Society Minutes 1777-1789, December 1784.

¹⁵³ ACL, 027.441 Air Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776-1830, 28.

¹⁵⁴ PWDRO, 458/1 Plymouth Proprietary Library Shares.

¹⁵⁵ *Whitby* (1814), 9-14.

¹⁵⁶ Mr and Mrs Bateman, Mr and Mrs Cayley, and Mr and Mrs Moorsom.

¹⁵⁷ *Ludlow* (1823), 13-14.

associations which sought to secure their long-term legacy. The Westgate Book Society wanted to 'be continued to future generations', and the Peterborough Society for the Promotion of Friendship and Literature argued that 'we and our Successors shall always have the Power and Possession of' their library.¹⁵⁸ The account of the Hull Subscription Library was written to 'rescue from oblivion the names of those, whose active minds formed the plan of an Institution, which must be considered as a valuable bequest from them'.¹⁵⁹ Associations thus portrayed shares and community membership as a bequest and an inheritance, constructing their inter-generational community on metaphors of family and lineage.

V. The Association and Age

As family environments, reading associations were extra-domestic forums in which inter-generational relationships, and age, were displayed and negotiated. Clark argues that 'young men were highly visible' in associations in general, despite older members often being in charge.¹⁶⁰ Borsay similarly suggests that the participation of children and adolescents in urban leisure culture including assemblies and balls became more visible in this period, as families now took their leisure time together.¹⁶¹ Whilst associations in general were places in which young people developed a public identity, reading associations were a particularly fruitful crucible for ideas about age. Reading was a foundational tool in the development of a young person's intellect and skills. However, Helen Yallop's analysis of the idea of age in eighteenth-century England explains that old men were supposed to be

¹⁵⁸ DCRO, D/X/1355/1 Westgate Library, 9; *Peterborough* (1783), iv-v.

¹⁵⁹ Crosse, *Account*, 2.

¹⁶⁰ Clark, *Clubs*, 204.

¹⁶¹ P. Borsay, 'Children, Adolescents and Fashionable Urban Society in Eighteenth-Century England', in A. Müller (ed.), *Fashioning Childhood in the Eighteenth Century: Age and Identity* (Aldershot, 2006), 53-62.

'cheerful', provoked by pleasant sociability.¹⁶² Being 'cheerful' also linked to the need for intellectual men to remain sociable, as an antidote to dullness or pedantry.¹⁶³ Sociable reading was thus of particular import to older men who needed to cultivate cheerfulness in company, preferably mingling with the young as well as the old, and not over-exert in their studies. Reading associations thus had important implications for demonstrating the education and maturity of young people, and the continued gregariousness of older readers.

Reading associations had always acquired works whose titles were directed towards young people in the families of subscribers,¹⁶⁴ as well as works relating to parenting, such as Edgeworth's *Practical Education*¹⁶⁵ or *The Family Instructor*.¹⁶⁶ These works were available for the members to borrow to read for themselves, and they may have then shared them with children in the home.¹⁶⁷ However, at a meeting of the Hull Subscription Library in 1814, a proposal for 'throwing open the gallery to sons of subscribers above 15, and under 21 years of age' was rejected.¹⁶⁸ A similar debate at the Bristol Library Society in 1828 concluded that allowing members to introduce boys between 14 and 21 would 'lead to great disorder in the library, and interfere materially with the convenience of the Subscribers'.¹⁶⁹ Clearly, whilst reading was recognised as beneficial source of information about and for young people, the associational environment was not for children or adolescents. The Hull Subscription Library sought to 'excite emulation in the rising generation', but children were to witness, rather than participate in, reading associations.¹⁷⁰

A handful of reading associations expressly made separate provision for young people. The Exeter Young Person's Library was designed for those 'between the age of 12 and 30', seeking to influence them in this formative period 'when those habits which

¹⁶² H. Yallop, *Age and Identity in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 2013), 85-99.

¹⁶³ Yallop, *Age*, 114.

¹⁶⁴ Such as *A Father's Advice to his Son* (Acquired in Wye Book Club, 1759), Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (Acquired in Ayr Library, 1781) and his *Addresses to Young Men* (Acquired in Ayr Library, 1781; Exeter Library Society, 1777), Gregory's *A Father's Letter to his Daughters* (Acquired in Exeter, 1778), Conder's *Letters to a Young Dissenter* (Acquired in the Eclectic Book Society, 1813); Mrs Opie's *New Tales* (Acquired in the Dursley Reading Society, 1818).

¹⁶⁵ Acquired in Greenock Library, 1802; Eclectic Book Society 1813.

¹⁶⁶ Acquired in the Caledonian Book Club, 1813.

¹⁶⁷ *Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*, 61 noted that she spent an hour in the Halifax Circulating Library 'looking out a couple of books with proper prints for the children to copy'.

¹⁶⁸ *The Hull Packet and Original Weekly Commercial, Literary and General Advertiser*, Dec. 13, 1814, Issue 1468.

¹⁶⁹ *The Bristol Mercury*, May 13, 1828, Issue 1987.

¹⁷⁰ *Address to the Subscribers to the Library at Hull*, 15.

constitute the character receive their direction'.¹⁷¹ The Greenock Library Society instituted a juvenile book department in 1812, to procure 'instructive books, adapted to the comprehension of children & young people'; a juvenile library also existed within the Glasgow Library in 1810.¹⁷² There was also a free-standing 'Junior Book Society' in Halifax in 1839.¹⁷³ This points towards a segregation of institutions in the nineteenth century, with specific provision for children's literature and children's access.

These exceptions aside, the normal practice was for reading association members to have equal rights and status as adults. Seniority was defined by the length of time they had been connected to the society: at Huntingdon Book Club, in the absence of the president, the 'senior Member present shall take the chair'.¹⁷⁴ Similarly, curators of the Kilmarnock Library were appointed according to 'the seniority of Members in the original subscription Roll'.¹⁷⁵ In the York Book Society, a pamphlet was first loaned to its proposer, and then to 'the Member next junior in the Society'.¹⁷⁶ In line with the egalitarian philosophy and voting practice outlined in chapter four, societies discarded distinctions of age and rank, and members were distinguished only by their length of commitment to the society.

From the perspective of individual members, however, reading associations were environments in which claims for maturity could be made, or stages in life-cycle could be displayed. At the Paisley Library Society, children of subscribers had free use of the library, 'but on arriving at Majority, they shall Subscribe the regulations, and pay', demonstrating their new independence in forming this contract with the society.¹⁷⁷ John Ludford joined the Coleshill Book Club at the age of 21, shortly after his father's death in 1775 and immediately before his marriage in 1778.¹⁷⁸ Joining the book club was an expression of his new position, and signalled his entrance to local civic society as an adult heir. His journal of his book club attendances occasionally included reasons for his absence from meetings, which indicated other new responsibilities he had acquired: in September 1778, he was absent as he was 'encamped with the Warwickshire Militia', and in August 1780, Ludford was 'attending

¹⁷¹ *Exeter* (1808), 5, 3.

¹⁷² WLA, WA1/1/1/1 Greenock Library Minute Book 1794-1815, 60; *Glasgow* (1810), 489.

¹⁷³ WYAS, HAS/B:11/6 Halifax Junior Book Society 1839.

¹⁷⁴ *Huntingdon* (1793), 6.

¹⁷⁵ BMC, AA/DC/180/1 Kilmarnock Public Library Minutes 1797-1823, 35.

¹⁷⁶ *York Book Society* (1797), 8.

¹⁷⁷ *Paisley* (1802), 6.

¹⁷⁸ L. F. Salzman, *A History of the County of Warwick: Volume 4, Hemlingford Hundred* (London, 1947), 5-9; *The Gentleman's Magazine: and, Historical Chronicle*, Vol. 95, Part II (London, 1825), 469.

Warwick Assizes'.¹⁷⁹ In September 1779, he noted that when he dined at the club 'it was also a Meeting of the Commissioners of the Land Tax'.¹⁸⁰ Joining the book club at this stage in his life connected associational sociability with other demonstrations of adulthood and responsibility, including military service and local administration, with Ludford encountering the same set of people in these different roles.

At the Eclectic Book Society in London, Mr Oram hosted a dinner for the other members 'on the occasion of his marriage', suggesting that this life change was announced and celebrated amongst the associational community.¹⁸¹ Henry Crabb Robinson recalled that he participated in a debate at the Royston Book Club, suggesting indulgently that 'what I said was, in truth, poor stuff, but I was very young, had great vivacity and an abundance of words'.¹⁸² This implies the exuberance with which a young man was able to display his learning and voice his opinions in these sociable environments. Emma Cadbury, the seven-year-old daughter of a Birmingham silk mercer, added a postscript to a letter written by her sister in 1818, to inform another sister that 'I made my entry into the world last night at the Book meeting at Thomas Rickman's'.¹⁸³ Her sister had noted that she had just transitioned to 'caps and handkerchiefs', suggesting that Emma was beginning her socialisation as a young woman, and she saw her attendance at a book meeting as part of this process of maturation. Thus, whilst reading associations officially considered members only in terms of their seniority within the association, they were clearly an environment in which individuals could forge their reputation and responsibility as adult, or display other life-cycle changes.

The diary of George Sandy, a sixteen-year-old apprentice in Edinburgh in the 1780s, details the club created by Sandy and two other teenage friends.¹⁸⁴ They formed a library by pooling their books, and took cultural trips on weekends, accompanied by a large bottle of whisky.¹⁸⁵ They instituted complex ceremonies for the election of their president, the keeper of the insignia and the management of their great seal, evidently emulating the practices of

¹⁷⁹ WCRO, CR2795/3 Ludford Journal, 2, 10.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁸¹ LMA, CLC/064/MS00988A The Eclectic Book Society Minute Book 1812-1820, 41.

¹⁸² *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson, Barrister-at-Law, F.S.A.*, ed. T. Sadler, 2 Vols (London, 1872), i. 21.

¹⁸³ E. Gibbins (ed.), *Records of the Gibbins Family Also a Few Reminiscences of Emma H. Gibbins and Letters and Papers Relating to the Bevington Family* (Birmingham, 1911), 258.

¹⁸⁴ 'Diary of George Sandy, Apprentice', ed. C. A. Malcolm, in *The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, Vol. 24 (Edinburgh, 1942), 1-69. Thanks to Abigail Williams for this reference.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

sophisticated associations.¹⁸⁶ Sandy's diary includes transcribed 'legal' documents between the three members, including a 'Promissory Note' promising to make an inventory of their art collection.¹⁸⁷ He also noted that his friend Hugh Watson, had agreed to 'bind and oblige myself, my heirs and successors and Assignees to Deliver up the second volume of "Sully's Memoirs"', couching an apparently trivial promise in quasi-legal language.¹⁸⁸ The activities of these three teenagers show an awareness of associational practice, and a desire to recreate their cultured, official air. This example indicates that reading associations had succeeded in inciting emulation in young people, and that the image of the learned association member had acquired considerable cultural purchase. These teenagers perceived associational activities, as well as alcohol-fuelled excursions, to be markers of adult manhood. Reading and cultural engagement had thus become components in the making of an adult man, alongside alcohol and independence.

However, reading associations were not solely for the young. Of the seventeen diarists studied here, their average age at their first recorded attendance at a reading association was 38.¹⁸⁹ Several of them attended for very long periods of time: Ludford recorded his attendance at the Coleshill Book Club over 19 years, and Marsh's diaries indicate his involvement with Chichester reading associations from the age of 37 to 76, despite identifying himself as being in the age of 'Decrepitude' when he was 70.¹⁹⁰ Holland's gout prevented him from attending some book club meetings towards the end of his life, although he attended a final dinner in 1817 before his death at the age of 71.¹⁹¹ William Stukeley noted that Mr Whiston at his book club was now 80; Benjamin Newton remarked that Dr Dodsworth 'ate an enormous dinner for an octogenarian' at the Bedale Book Club.¹⁹² The elderly were therefore as visible in reading associations as the youthful, and were likely

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 65-68.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 24.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 55.

¹⁸⁹ *A Truly Honest Man: The Diary of Joseph Moxon of Market Bosworth 1798 and 1799*, ed. P. J. Foss and T. Parry (Macclesfield, 1998); *Ridpath*; 'Diary of George Sandy'; *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson*; *William Johnston Temple; Paupers and Pig Killers*; *Peeps into the Past being Passages from the Diary of Thomas Asline Ward*, ed. A. B. Bell (Sheffield, 1909); *The Diary of Benjamin Newton*; *The Diary of John Longe*; *The Diary of Mary Hardy 1773-1809*, iii; *The Grove Diaries*; *John Marsh Journals* (Stuyvesant, 1998); *The Journal of Samuel Curwen*, i; *The Oakes Diaries*, i; *Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*; *Two Yorkshire Diaries*; WCRO, CR2795/3 Ludford Journal.

¹⁹⁰ *John Marsh Journals* (Stuyvesant, 1998); *John Marsh Journals Volume II* (Hillsdale, 2013), 319.

¹⁹¹ *Paupers and Pig Killers*.

¹⁹² BOD, MS. Eng. misc. e. 128 William Stukeley's commonplace book 1749, 1; *The Diary of Benjamin Newton*, 105.

to have higher status because of their longevity within the community. With regards to female members, one indication of age is whether the appellation of 'Mrs' or 'Miss' is used.¹⁹³ In the fifty membership lists examined, there were 195 women recorded as 'Mrs' and 148 recorded as 'Miss'. Associational membership was not the preserve of young women, but involved a range of people at all stages of the life cycle.

In fact, reading associations seem to have encouraged the intermingling of generations. The chairman of the Reading Permanent Library explained a variety of benefits it would bring, including 'a fund of rational amusement for those of riper years'.¹⁹⁴ A poem written by Thomas Crichton in 1802, addressed to the newly founded Paisley Library Society, suggested that they sought to 'teach the Youth... To spend, improv'd, his idle, vacant hour'.¹⁹⁵ Crichton admired 'the hoary Sire... Whose mind is fraught with knowledge' as opposed to those that 'when decrepid Age... Steals on, their mental poverty appears'.¹⁹⁶ Knowledge accorded respect to the youthful, and ensured the reputation of the elderly. Reading associations were an important environment in which individuals could establish their character, linking intellect and sociability to their life-cycle.

VI. Conclusion

The acknowledged social value and personal improvement afforded by reading made these associations particularly important forums in which both old and young could claim moral and intellectual authority. Contemporary values suggested that (directed) reading was accessible and advantageous to all, empowering women and even children as readers. The wider social connotations of associations meant that they were exploited by young adults as

¹⁹³ On the connotations of these titles, see A. L. Erickson, 'Mistresses and Marriage: or, a Short History of the Mrs', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (2014), 39-57.

¹⁹⁴ *A Letter from the Chairman Explaining the Founding of the Library. With Rules.* (Reading, 1807), 1.

¹⁹⁵ T. Crichton, 'The Library', in T. Leonard (ed.), *Radical Renfrew: Poetry from the French Revolution to the First World War* (Edinburgh, 1990), 53-54.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

cultural capital which proved their maturity and responsibility as citizens. The family that the associations envisaged began as a domestic unit, in which the home was twinned with the reading association environment, with children vicariously benefiting from the associational membership of their father (and perhaps mother). As the children of the family grew up, they could be brought into the public life of the association, participating alongside parents and siblings. Eventually, library shares would be inherited, making the associational environment an important venue in which family lineage and reputation for community involvement was perpetuated.

Just as other historians have rewritten men into the history of the feminised household, this chapter has used women's and families' participation in local associational life to further examine the roles and forums of sociability which were available to them. St Clair's suggestion that 'the two reading spheres were separate even within the walls of the same household' cannot be sustained.¹⁹⁷ This chapter has demonstrated the practical and discursive significance of kinship and the household within reading associations, questioning the public and masculine valence of these spaces. The reading associations' meeting-places were only one of their venues; their counterpart was the household, in which books were read, shared and discussed. Sometimes, multiple members of this household were involved in the association, thus bringing the family household to bear even in the 'public' meetings of the organisation. The reading association thus appears as a fluid site, which overspilled and bridged several presumed polarities. Associations facilitated individual reading as well as sociable interactions, contributing to private as well as public constructions of the self; they could be construed as sites of 'womanly' leisure or 'masculine' study; and they could be public arenas governed by laws, or extensions of kinship connections and local communities.

Associations did not fit neatly into descriptions of either 'public' or 'private' spheres; rather, they corresponded to Kathryn Gleadle's concept of the parochial realm. She argues that women were able to take on 'public' roles within their local communities which accorded them much greater authority than they were able to achieve through national political engagement.¹⁹⁸ Associations were one example of this community, or parochial, sphere, and this chapter has clearly demonstrated the unprecedented authority which women were

¹⁹⁷ St Clair, *Nation*, 260.

¹⁹⁸ Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, 123, 241, 260-261.

occasionally able to wield in these environments. Reading associations appear to have contrasted contemporary practices in various ways, by according women voting and property rights, and giving them positions of authority within public institutions.¹⁹⁹ Women's voting rights and inheritance of familial shares actually suggest an erasure of gender: they were usually considered as equal members, and could even hold positions of authority over their male counterparts. Clearly, the significant numbers of people involved in reading associations did not see this mixed-sex sociability and shared reading practice as a contradiction of their wider social mores; this parochial sphere afforded opportunities to women within local communities, but did not go hand in hand with radical feminism or calls for wider equality. This tolerance of inconsistencies in ideas about women's voting and authority reinforces Fletcher's argument about the flexibility of patriarchy in this period.²⁰⁰ Vickery's study of provincial gentlewomen concluded that the categories of 'public' and 'private' were more about 'inclusive sociability open to all and discriminating assemblies accessible to the few, emphatically not a distinction between a male world and a female home'.²⁰¹ By closely examining one arena of sociability, this chapter has shown that men and women, association and household, were intermingled and mutually reinforcing, under the discourse of propriety, order and citizenship previously outlined.

Why were reading associations particularly accessible to women, in comparison to other institutions? In part, this was due to the nature of reading itself, which conceptually connected individual readers into a national reading public, with literacy becoming 'the test of citizenship'.²⁰² The accessibility of reading itself meant that associations were forced to recognise women readers as legitimate cultural participants and, ultimately, citizens of the republic of letters. Additionally, the cultural changes associated with polite sociability legitimated the participation of women. Discourses about female piety and maternal educational roles contributed to the growing acceptance of women's reading. The

¹⁹⁹ A. Chernock, *Men and the Making of Modern British Feminism* (Stanford, 2010), 127, 108 documents that there was a 'vocal minority' who debated female citizenship at the end of the eighteenth century, but that, even amongst radicals, 'the majority shared an overwhelming commitment to designating the political subject as male'. Davidoff and Hall, *Family*, 134 suggests that even in dissenting congregations, women were excluded from voting and office-holding.

²⁰⁰ Fletcher, *Gender*, 191.

²⁰¹ Vickery, *Daughter*, 290.

²⁰² K. Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire, and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 2003), 35. See also K. Glover, 'The Female Mind: Scottish Enlightenment Femininity and the World of Letters. A Case Study of the Women of the Fletcher of Saltoun Family in the Mid-Eighteenth Century', *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2005), 9, 20.

feminisation of conversation through this period dovetailed with ideas about reading, as books were perceived as objects that the reader *conversed* with, periodicals recreated coffeehouse *conversations* amongst a print community, and reading was often seen as a preparation for conversation.²⁰³ Enlightenment ideas of women's conversational aptitude had a metaphorical significance for their reading practice, and encouraged their participation within the conversational reading community.

What was the significance of women's involvement within reading associations? The personal effects of women's reading have been well established by case studies such as those undertaken by Vickery, who emphasised the 'wider cultural horizons' which genteel women gained through their reading.²⁰⁴ Men and women shared these reading environments, thus refuting historians' perceptions of gendered reading cultures, in which men read in solitude in the study, whereas women read in sociable and less serious groups.²⁰⁵ The presence of women did not change the fundamental ethos of the reading association: they were still distinguished from the 'feminised' circulating libraries, and used a rhetoric of purposeful learning or, at least, rational amusement rather than confessing a desire for frivolous leisure. Women were thus admitted into this masculine-coded forum, upgrading from frivolous, individual reading to purposeful, collective reading. In the same way that women were sometimes said to behave in 'manly' ways, associations show that reading practices were deemed to be gendered at least partially because of individuals' behaviour as well as by their biology.²⁰⁶

Indeed, perhaps the predominantly male community was thought to encourage correct reading, in contrast to women's predilections for frivolous fiction. Rather than indicating revolutionary new ideas about women's intellect, women's participation in reading associations was rooted in traditional ideas of family and community, which helped to ensure the safety of women's reading practices. Pearson argued that reading associations were a 'compromise space' between public and private, which were a respectable and acceptable

²⁰³ Brewer, *Pleasures*, 190; J. Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention and Community 1762 to 1830* (Oxford, 2011), 10, 21-22; M. Cohen, "'A Proper Exercise for the Mind": Conversation and Education in the Long Eighteenth Century', in K. Halsey and J. Slinn (eds), *The Concept and Practice of Conversation in the Long Eighteenth Century, 1688-1848* (Newcastle, 2008), 111.

²⁰⁴ Vickery, *Daughter*, 9, 287; See also Bull, 'Reading Lives', 37-38.

²⁰⁵ Glover, 'Female Mind', 7; Dunstan, 'Reading', 54.

²⁰⁶ Chernock, *Men*, 30.

place for women to read in.²⁰⁷ As well as providing community oversight in line with proper taste, this chapter has additionally demonstrated that reading associations were particularly appropriate for women's reading, as they emphasised familial and household reading in their discourse and practices. The reading which women undertook in associations was legitimised and authorised by the community, which held itself accountable for the propriety of the books it acquired. As the domestic library had become a family space over this period,²⁰⁸ so too did these reading communities become a site for mixed-gender, intergenerational community, modelled upon the reassuringly familiar family unit. One way in which the national reading public was manifested and managed was at the level of the parochial sphere, through reading communities based on kinship and local connections. Whilst reading broadened women's horizons, associations provided material boundaries, and a community of spectators.

²⁰⁷ Pearson, *Women's Reading*, 160-161.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

Chapter Six

Associations in Local Context¹

I. Introduction

This chapter explores how associations related to their local communities, physically and conceptually. Reception theory places a new emphasis on the specificity of the meaning that is created within the circumstances of each reading environment. Place has too often been ignored in book history: provincial readers have been examined not for their experience of provincality, but rather as representatives of 'ordinary' life.² Reading should be subjected to a place-oriented examination, given it is a particularly situated practice, involving many frames of reference. The environment of textual encounter is a key determinant of its interpretation;³ as is the literary frame of reference of its reader,⁴ and the interpretive community in which it is read.⁵ For this reason, when analysing the culture and practices of a community, and particularly in the case of a reading association, the local environment and local identities must be considered as integral features of that community.

The most influential argument about eighteenth century place and geography in relation to culture is Peter Borsay's account of the 'urban renaissance' between 1660 and 1770, which comprised a new flourishing of classical architecture, a concern for 'a more

¹ Earlier versions of parts of this chapter have been published in C. Ford, "An Honour to the Place": Reading Associations and Improvement', *Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Dec., 2015), 555-568.

² J. Fergus, *Provincial Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 2006).

³ D. N. Livingstone, 'Science, Text and Space: Thoughts on the Geography of Reading', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Dec., 2005), 391-392.

⁴ J. Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, Second edn (London, 2010), 41.

⁵ S. E. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, 1980); B. Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, 1983).

convenient and comfortable physical environment', and a perception of the physical town as 'more ordered, integrated, and therefore "urban"'.⁶ He argues that there was a growing sense of the town as a collective space rather than an aggregation of individual buildings, and a concomitant development of cultural institutions, particularly facilitated by the press.⁷ This urban renaissance was partly fuelled by social emulation, as well as the pursuit of civility as an expression of 'an English enlightenment'.⁸ Polite culture was particularly vested in towns due to their facilities such as libraries, promenades, and assembly rooms.⁹ Both contemporaries and modern historians have perpetuated this focus on towns as the centre of polite sociability and enlightened improvement, making urbanity central to the polite project.¹⁰ Borsay states that 'almost all' subscription libraries were based in towns, while Ina Ferris and John Brewer locate book clubs in the countryside.¹¹ Ferris suggests that these country book clubs were 'derided and dismissed by a metropolitan literary culture'.¹² However, this simple schema of polite urban subscription libraries and bucolic book clubs cannot be sustained in the face of examples such as the book societies in London and Birmingham; or the subscription libraries in Dalkeith, Haworth and Fort William. A reconsideration of the physical and conceptual links between reading associations and their locations, whether town and country, is therefore necessary.

Furthermore, how did the associational culture vary within different types of towns? Categories such as manufacturing, market, port and leisure towns differed in size and demography,¹³ so it is reasonable to suggest that their values, rhetoric, and perhaps even construction of politeness and improvement, may have varied. Paul Elliott suggests that the scientific culture of industrial and trading towns was more utilitarian and applied than county

⁶ P. Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660-1770* (Oxford, 1989), 42.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 80, 131.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 261.

¹⁰ R. Sweet, *The Writing of Urban Histories in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1997), 146; R. Sweet, 'Topographies of Politeness', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 12 (Dec., 2002), 355-357; J. Stobart, A. Hann, and V. Morgan, *Spaces of Consumption: Leisure and Shopping in the English Town, c.1680-1830* (London, 2007), 57-59.

¹¹ Borsay, *Urban Renaissance*, 135; I. Ferris, *Book-Men, Book Clubs, and the Romantic Literary Sphere* (Basingstoke, 2015), 3; J. Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1997), 182.

¹² Ferris, *Book-men*, 103.

¹³ Sweet, *Urban Histories*, 7.

towns, which focused on their historical and antiquarian traditions.¹⁴ Brewer suggested that the holdings of subscription libraries 'mirrored the civic preoccupations and commercial interests of their members', linking their intellectual life to their local circumstances.¹⁵ Some contemporary writers also suggested that commercial activities were incompatible with polite behaviours.¹⁶ Bob Harris and Charles McKean's study of Scottish towns emphasises the distinctiveness of their experience of urban improvements within a British context, based on their smaller size, the importance of the guildry and the kirk, and their use of town councils rather than improvement commissions.¹⁷ This draws attention to the effect that existing social structures and local cultures had in mediating supposedly universal ideas of enlightenment, improvement or politeness. Did reading associations in different types of town claim to offer different opportunities, tailored to the economic focus of the town?

Following on from this discussion of urban and rural environments, is the question of the geography of cultural influences in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain. Was this a culture which focused on metropolitan fashions, or were alternative frameworks of local or regional identity important in the construction of status and ambition? Historians have questioned the presumed cultural dominance of London, with Jonathan Barry, Helen Berry, Peter Clark, and Paul Elliott all drawing attention to the negotiation of national, metropolitan values at a local level.¹⁸ For example, Berry examines the Newcastle Assembly rooms, arguing that although they drew on a 'national taste for polite sociability', they were distinctly designed, funded and patronised by locals.¹⁹ She also indicates that York and Bath were important paradigms for assembly rooms, alongside London examples.²⁰ Indeed,

¹⁴ P. Elliott, 'Towards a Geography of English Scientific Culture: Provincial Identity and Literary and Philosophical Culture in the English County Town, 1750-1850', *Urban History*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Dec., 2005), 398, 411. See also P. Elliott, *Enlightenment, Modernity and Science: Geographies of Scientific Culture and Improvement in Georgian England* (London, 2010), 177.

¹⁵ Brewer, *Pleasures*, 180.

¹⁶ J. Stobart, 'Culture versus Commerce: Societies and Spaces for Elites in Eighteenth-Century Liverpool', *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (2002), 476; Sweet, 'Topographies', 364-365.

¹⁷ B. Harris and C. McKean, *The Scottish Town in the Age of the Enlightenment 1740-1820* (Edinburgh, 2014), 43, 65-66, 86-87.

¹⁸ J. Barry, 'Provincial Town Culture, 1640-1780: Urbane or Civic?', in J. Pittock and A. Wear (eds), *Interpretation and Cultural History* (Basingstoke, 1991), 198-234; H. Berry, 'Creating Polite Space: The Organisation and Social Function of the Newcastle Assembly Rooms', in H. Berry and J. Gregory (eds), *Creating and Consuming Culture in North-East England, 1660-1830* (Aldershot, 2004), 138; P. Clark, 'Chapter 22: Small Towns 1700-1840', in P. Clark (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain Volume 2: 1540-1840* (Cambridge, 2000), 767; Elliott, *Enlightenment*, 14.

¹⁹ Berry, 'Creating Polite Space', 138.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

associations served to differentiate and adorn their towns: they were a 'yardstick' for the cultural success of a town, acting as 'beacons of enlightenment', which demonstrated 'the towns' serious intellectual credentials'.²¹ However, was this a question of keeping up with other towns, by having a respectable array of urbane cultural resources, or did towns take a distinctive, civic pride in their local associations?²² Barry suggests that the annals of towns such as Bristol began to focus more on local events in the eighteenth century, and the town's commercial elite presented themselves as honourable, reinforcing a historical link with the civic community.²³ According to Barry, another method by which this elite represented their antiquity was through associations. This chapter goes further, asking how associations themselves identified with or contributed to civic identity.

This thesis has emphasised the construction of identity within reading associations, arguing that they promoted the gentility of their members, construing them as lovers of reading, and as subscribers to the moral regulation of their contractual community. Often, historians represent associations as tools in the creation of local elite cultures, with their ideas and practices creating an urban bourgeoisie, forging alliances between local urban and landed gentry, or giving marginal people such as dissenters some cultural purchase in elite circles.²⁴ How then did people in associations, which developed these strong internal identities, relate to those outside of them? This chapter will examine how reading associations reflected and constituted their locality, by examining the geography of their membership; how their discourse was adapted to their local environment; and associations' conceptualisation of their role in their locality.

²¹ P. Clark, *Sociability and Urbanity: Clubs and Societies in the Eighteenth Century City* (Leicester, 1986), 11; B. Harris, 'The Enlightenment, Towns and Urban Society in Scotland, c. 1760-1820', *English Historical Review*, Vol. CXXVI, No. 522 (Oct., 2011), 1126; B. Harris, 'Cultural Change in Provincial Scottish Towns, c. 1700-1820', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Mar., 2011), 139; see also Stobart, 'Culture versus Commerce', 472.

²² Brewer, *Pleasures*, 182; W. St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge, 2004), 258.

²³ Barry, 'Provincial Town Culture', in Pittock and Wear, *Interpretation*, 215-219.

²⁴ B. Harris, 'Towns, Improvement and Cultural Change in Georgian Scotland: the Evidence of the Angus Burghs, c. 1760-1820', *Urban History*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Aug., 2006), 212; R. J. Morris, 'Voluntary Societies and British Urban Elites, 1780-1850: An Analysis', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Mar., 1983), 95-118; A. Thackray, 'Natural Knowledge in Cultural Context: The Manchester Mode', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 79, No. 3 (Jun., 1974), 672-709; P. Elliott, 'The Origins of the "Creative Class": Provincial Urban Society, Scientific Culture and socio-political Marginality in Britain in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', *Social History*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2003), 361-387.

II. The Geography of the Reading Association: the Influence of the Town

Although reading associations are associated with urban politeness, it is recognised that these societies comprised rural elements too. Borsay suggested that urban libraries were 'frequented by a mixed urban and rural clientele', and Jon Stobart *et al.* broaden this argument about the relationship between urban institutions and rural consumers to suggest that later eighteenth-century towns were 'providing rural dwellers with access to leisure facilities and a new polite material culture'.²⁵ Close studies of the composition of reading associations which explore the dynamics of these geographical relationships are, however, thin on the ground. Bob Harris suggests that membership patterns in Scottish subscription libraries 'reflected fairly closely the nature of town and its relations with its environs', and Mark Towsey shows that the Kirkcudbright Library 'combined the rural and urban elements of provincial society'.²⁶ This chapter offers a broader account of how town- and country-dwellers were encompassed into the community of the reading association.

Using the same sample of fifty reading association rulebooks from chapter four, this research shows how spatial identities were mediated by associations.²⁷ All of the associations in this sample included their locality in their name, showing its importance to their self-definition. Their titles primarily referred to their town (or, in some cases, village) community. The only exceptions are the Cornwall County Library, whose antiquarian county focus will be explored later; the Broome Street Circulating Library of Manchester, apparently seeking to distinguish itself from other local institutions by its precise location; and the Ayr, Newton and Wallacetown Library, and the Edgbaston and Five Ways Book Society, whose names combined multiple suburban locations.²⁸ 24% of the associations in this sample found it necessary to delimit the distance that a member could live from the association.²⁹ The

²⁵ Borsay, *Urban Renaissance*, 135; Stobart *et al.*, *Spaces*, 35.

²⁶ B. Harris, 'The Enlightenment', 1126; M. R. M. Towsey, *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment: Books and Their Readers in Provincial Scotland, 1750-1820* (Leiden, 2010), 63.

²⁷ See page 135.

²⁸ *Cornwall* (1792); *Broome Street* (1806); *Newton* (1814); *Edgbaston* (1816).

²⁹ BOD, G. A. Warw b.1 (777) *Articles established for the Government of a Book Society in the City of Coventry*; *Manchester* (1794), 73; *Macclesfield* (1796), 38; *Paisley* (1802), 4; BA, FZ/17 Union Book Club Memorandum Book, 3; *Chichester Library Society* (1806), 674; *A Letter from the Chairman Explaining the Founding of the Library. With Rules*. (Reading, 1807), 1; *Edgbaston* (1816), 1; *Dursley* (1818), 5; *Edinburgh* (1823), 1; WCRO, CR0229/Box12/1 Miscellaneous Ettington Book Club Records, 4.

Chichester Library Society stated that members had to live within twelve miles; at Macclesfield Circulating Library it was five; at the Dursley Reading Society, three miles; and at Manchester Circulating Library, two. The point of this legislation was to ensure the ease of circulation: the Bolton Union Club suggested excluding people who lived at 'a distance that he cannot conveniently derive any advantage', and the Eatington Book Club prohibited those 'whose residence is so situated as to cause inconvenience... in the transmission of books'.³⁰ The Kilmarnock Library circumscribed the circulation of books, stating that no-one should 'take a Book belonging to the Society out of Ayrshire'.³¹ These boundaries to the physical circulation of associational books emphasised the material exchange implicit in library practice. They also enhanced the reading community's sense of territoriality, and of geographical specificity.

The counterpart of prohibitions on remote membership were rules in 38% of associations which gave special dispensation to members who lived further away, facilitating their participation in the community by giving them extra time to read books.³² This shows that legislation was not an expression of town antagonism towards country members, contrary to the presumed rival discourses of urban civility and rural vulgarity, but rather an effort to control circulation and avoid the difficulties of far-away members.³³ Overall, the rules indicate that reading associations were concerned with maximising the efficiency and viability of their book circulation. A prime example is the fact that Greenock Library, in a west-coast Scottish town, prohibited members 'to which water carriage is necessary'.³⁴

However, this acknowledgement of near and far membership did differentiate people based on location. Eighteen associations made reference to the 'town' in their rules, and

³⁰ BA, FZ/17 Union Book Club Memorandum Book, 3; WCRO, CR0229/Box12/1 Miscellaneous Ettington Book Club Records, 4.

³¹ BMC, AA/DC/180/1 Kilmarnock Public Library Minutes 1797-1823, 8.

³² Ayr (1802), 12; CAC, WPR/59/2 Sedbergh Book Club, 4; *Halifax* (1786), 68; HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library Laws, 5; R. Polwhele, *The Language, Literature, and Literary Characters, of Cornwall: with Illustrations from Devonshire* (London, 1806), 101-102; *Lewes* (1793), 5; HL, MS 5/27 Wigtown Subscription Library, 4; *York Book Society* (1797), 7; BMC, AA/DC/180/1 Kilmarnock Public Library Minutes 1797-1823, 8; CAC, WPR/59/1A Kendal Book Club Rules, 6-7; *Paisley* (1802), 12-13; *Broome Street* (1806), 669; *Ipswich* (1806); *Oxford* (1809), 6; *Hull* (1822), 6; *Whitby* (1814), 3; *Select York* (1818), xii; *Ludlow* (1823), 5; *Dudley* (1826), viii.

³³ Stobart *et al.*, *Spaces*, 4.

³⁴ WLA, WA1/1/1/1, Greenock Library Minute Book 1794-1815, 48.

eleven differentiated 'country' members.³⁵ Other modes of differentiation were also used: the Edgbaston and Five Ways Book Society, Ludlow Library and Reading Library referred to the 'neighbourhood', the York Book Society and Paisley Library referred to the 'suburbs', the Chichester Library Society and Oxford Subscription Library referred to those out of the 'vicinity', and the Kilmarnock Library referred to members outside of the 'parish'.³⁶ The earliest of these references is from the York Book Society from 1797, showing a new vocabulary of location around the turn of the century, which moved beyond the historic town and country divide. This geographical vocabulary used by reading associations thus shows a conscious distinction between town and country, or central and distant, members.

Occasionally, this was carried through into legislation about the management of the society: the Malton Library and the Paisley Library mandated that the committee had to be inhabitants of the town (and its suburbs, in the case of Paisley), the Macclesfield Library's committee had to live within five miles, and the Chichester Library's president was to live in the city.³⁷ Only one association, the Dudley Library, demanded that one-third of the committee be from the country: otherwise, no effort was made to balance the authority of town and country members.³⁸ There were more stringent attendance expectations for town members, whilst country members were subject to lesser forfeits and more infrequent meetings: the town members thus formed the active core of the association.³⁹ To be out of town equated to being excused from the normal operations of the society, which had negative implications. In the Hull Subscription Library, absent committee members were only

³⁵ 'Town': *Liverpool* (1760), 10; CAC, WPR/59/2 Sedbergh Book Club, 2; *Leeds* (1785), 92; *Manchester* (1796), 75; HL, MS 5/27 Wigtown Subscription Library, 1; *Macclesfield* (1796), 34; *York Book Society* (1797), 6; CAC, WPR/59/1A Kendal Book Club Rules, 6; *Paisley* (1802), 12; *Broome Street* (1806), 669; *A Letter from the Chairman*, 4; *Crosse, Account*, Rules, 4; *Tavistock* (1810); *Whitby* (1814), 2; *Select York* (1818), v; *Ludlow* (1823), 12; *Edinburgh* (1823), 6; *Dudley* (1826), v. 'Country': *Ayr* (1802), 11; CAC, WPR/59/2 Sedbergh Book Club, 4; BOD, G. A. Warw b.1 (777) *Articles established for the Government of a Book Society in the City of Coventry*; *Kelso* (1790), 66; *Polwhele, Cornwall*, 102; *York Book Society* (1797), 8; CAC, WPR/59/1A Kendal Book Club Rules, 6; *Paisley* (1802), 13; *Crosse, Account*, Rules, 6; *Whitby* (1814), 2; *Dudley* (1826), viii.

³⁶ *Edgbaston* (1816), 1; *Ludlow* (1823), 12; *A Letter from the Chairman*, 4; *York Book Society* (1797), 7; *Paisley* (1802), 10; *Chichester Library Society* (1806), 675; *Oxford* (1809), 3; BMC, AA/DC/180/1 Kilmarnock Public Library Minutes 1797-1823, 8.

³⁷ HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library Laws, 2; *Paisley* (1802), 10; *Macclesfield* (1796), 34; *Chichester Library Society* (1806), 674.

³⁸ *Dudley* (1826), iv.

³⁹ CAC, WPR/59/2 Sedbergh Book Club, 8; *Lewes* (1793), 3; CAC, WPR/59/1A Kendal Book Club Rules, 6; BA, FZ/17 Union Book Club Memorandum Book, 2; *Chichester Book Society* (1806), 673; *Chichester Library Society* (1806), 675; *Dudley* (1826), v.

excused 'except confined by sickness, or out of town'.⁴⁰ In Manchester Circulating Library, committee members were to be replaced if they 'die, or leave the town'.⁴¹ Thus to be in town was to be an active participant; to be in the countryside was to be removed from authority, activity and sociability.

Whilst it has now been established that associations expected greater participation from town members, and excused the absence of country members, what was the actual geography of associational membership? The idea of the hinterland of a reading association (and, by extension, of the town) can be elaborated through close examination of membership patterns. Historiographically, little attention has been paid to this, aside from Towsey's assertion that Scottish libraries had a 'relatively wide geographical distribution'.⁴² Of the sample of fifty membership lists used in chapter five, but excluding the Book Society of Twelve because it does not specify the society's location, 34% gave details of the location of their members.⁴³ Six of these lists recorded a place for each member,⁴⁴ and the remainder highlighted the locations of only some of the members, implying that the rest were residents of the eponymous town.⁴⁵ The proportion of members with specified locations (i.e. non-resident members), ranges from 2% at the Halifax Circulating Library, to 67% at the Duns Subscription Library. The mean average across these lists is 36% of members with a specified location other than the eponymous town; around one-third of the members of the average reading society were therefore 'country' members, or had a private residence which they were identified with over and above their habitation in the town. Urban associations were not solely made up of townspeople, but rather drew in interested parties from neighbouring settlements, under the banner of their town's identity.

⁴⁰ Crosse, *Account*, Rules, 4. See also *Macclesfield* (1796), 34; *York Book Society* (1797), 6; *Broome Street* (1806), 669; *Select York* (1818), v; *Ludlow* (1823), 7; *Edinburgh* (1823), 6.

⁴¹ *Manchester* (1794), 76; see also *Liverpool* (1760), 10.

⁴² M. R. M. Towsey, 'First Steps in Associational Reading: Book Use and Sociability at the Wigtown Subscription Library, 1795-9', *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, Vol. 103, No. 4 (Dec., 2009), 455-495.

⁴³ *Halifax* (1786), *Leeds* (1785), *Duns* (1789), *Stamford* (1789), *Kelso* (1790), *Huntingdon* (1793), *Manchester* (1794), HL, MS 5/27 Wigtown Subscription Library, *Kilmarnock* (1797), *Ayr* (1802), *Tavistock* (1810), *Kilmarnock* (1811), *Lincoln* (1815), *Ayr* (1817), *Select York* (1818), *Haworth* (1820), *Doncaster* (1829). For sample, see page 173.

⁴⁴ *Kelso* (1790); *Huntingdon* (1793); HL, MS 5/27 Wigtown Subscription Library; *Ayr* (1802); *Ayr* (1817), *Haworth* (1820).

⁴⁵ Exceptions are the membership lists of the Kilmarnock Library for 1797 and 1811, and the Duns Subscription Library, which list members from the town, from other places, and for others give no place name at all. For the subsequent tabulations, only those with a listed place other than the library's town have been counted.

Associations' construction of their members as a local elite has already been examined, as part of the differentiation of the lettered from the unlettered, and the enlightened from the unenlightened. This construction of superiority also built upon urban hierarchies: reading societies often included significant numbers of local office-holders, a middle-class and even gentry oligarchy.⁴⁶ 15 of the 19 members of the municipal government listed in Kilmarnock's local directory in the 1820s had been members of the Kilmarnock Library.⁴⁷ 10 of the 14 Justices of the Peace were library members, and 11 of 13 Trustees for the Improvement of the Town of Kilmarnock had been library members at some point. These improvers were involved in a range of activities, showing the cross-fertilisation of ideas of improvement from different associational fields.⁴⁸ Members of associations also participated alongside one another in other communities: eight of the original members of the Hull Subscription Library served together on the Hull General Infirmary Committee in 1803,⁴⁹ and four Dursley Reading Society members were amongst the eight men appointed as a local committee to swear in special constables.⁵⁰ The Chichester Book Society moved their meeting if it coincided with the farmers' club at the local inns, presumably because of individuals who participated in both groups.⁵¹ Similarly, Ridpath's library meeting often coincided with his presbytery meeting, and he also noted that the St James' fair day left their library meeting rather depleted: the associations were competing with other local institutions for the attention of their members.⁵² Moxon recorded going to Atherstone Market, where he gathered book club money as well as the county rates, mingling civic tasks with associational ones in this urban space.⁵³ Associations were thus part of a shifting social landscape, and were integrated into the physical spaces, rhythms and communities of local life.

⁴⁶ St. Clair, *Nation*, 258; D. Allan, *A Nation of Readers: The Lending Library in Georgian England* (London, 2008), 70-71; Towsey, *Reading*, 61.

⁴⁷ *Pigot & Co.'s New Commercial Directory of Scotland for 1825-6* (London, 1825), 238-239.

⁴⁸ For other intellectual coteries that were involved in a variety of town institutions, see A. Wilson, "'The Florence of the North'": The Civic Culture of Liverpool in the Early Nineteenth Century', in A. J. Kidd and D. Nicholls (eds), *Gender, Civic Culture, and Consumerism: Middle-Class Identity in Britain, 1800-1940* (Manchester, 1999), 36-38; Harris, 'The Enlightenment', 1125.

⁴⁹ *The Hull Packet and Original Weekly Commercial, Literary and General Advertiser*, Feb. 1, 1803, Issue 838.

⁵⁰ GA, D9125/1/8267 Special Constables.

⁵¹ *Chichester Book Society* (1806), 673.

⁵² *Diary of George Ridpath, Minister of Stichel, 1755-1761*, ed. J. Balfour Paul (Edinburgh, 1922), 39, 102; 23.

⁵³ *A Truly Honest Man: The Diary of Joseph Moxon of Market Bosworth 1798 and 1799*, ed. P. J. Foss and T. Parry (Macclesfield, 1998), 46, 80, 124.

Associations also drew upon the physical environment of the town to conduct, regulate and legitimise their activities. Twenty-eight of the institutions in this sample of rulebooks mentioned their premises. Ten used commercial or civic facilities such as public houses and town halls; eighteen suggested either private homes or the library's own rooms (although often these could be rented spaces in commercial or civic facilities rather than purpose-built library premises); and the Dudley Library met either at the library room or the Dudley's Arms.⁵⁴ From minute books, it is apparent that Scottish associations often met in local schools, paying the schoolmaster to be their librarian.⁵⁵ This may have led to a stronger association with the town's facilities, as they were housed in public, educational buildings. The Greenock Library was originally located in the house of a member, then met in various schools in the town, before being offered a space in the assembly rooms, and finally had a library built for them by the town council.⁵⁶ The Kilmarnock Library moved from the grammar school's hall, where it had been since 1797, to the bell room of the town house in 1811.⁵⁷ Later, the Kilmarnock Philosophical Institution was permitted to store their books on the library's shelves, intermingling these intellectual institutions within civic premises. Regardless of where they met within the town, associations were still part of this urban landscape: the Chichester Book Society measured lateness by 'the Cross Clock', a monumental feature of their town environment, and the Dudley Library similarly issued fines in accordance with the chimes of the town-hall clock.⁵⁸ Associations were therefore not a separate, abstract sphere of sociability, but were firmly intermingled with civic spaces and local communities.

⁵⁴ Commercial/civic spaces: LPL, MS 1694 Wye Book Club Papers. Rules and Accounts 1755-1766, 1; *Peterborough* (1783), iv; *Leeds* (1785), 91; HHC, UDDSY/79/2 New Malton Subscription Library, 1; Polwhele, *Cornwall*, 103; *Huntingdon* (1793), 1; *Macclesfield* (1796), 32; CAC, WPR/59/1A Kendal Book Club Rules, 4; *Oxford* (1809), 1; *Dursley* (1818), 5; *Dudley* (1826), iv. Private spaces: *Liverpool* (1760), 7; CAC, WPR/59/2 Sedbergh Book Club, 2; *London* (1785), 2; *Kelso* (1790), 69; *Lewes* (1793), 3; HL, MS 5/27 Wigtown Subscription Library, 2; *York Book Society* (1797), 6; *Broome Street* (1806), 669; *Chichester Book Society* (1806), 673; *Chichester Library Society* (1806), 774; Crosse, *Account*, Rules, 2; *Tavistock* (1810); *Whitby* (1814), 2; *Newton* (1814), 3; *Ludlow* (1283), 7; *Edinburgh* (1823), 4; *Dudley* (1826), iv.

⁵⁵ WLA, WA1/1/1/1 Greenock Library Minute Book 1794-1815, 1-2; BMC, AA/DC/180/1 Kilmarnock Public Library Minutes 1797-1823, 25.

⁵⁶ WLA, WA1/1/1/1 Greenock Library Minute Book 1794-1815, 1, 3, 65, 66.

⁵⁷ BMC, AA/DC/180/1 Kilmarnock Public Library Minutes 1797-1823, 25, 83.

⁵⁸ *Chichester Library Society* (1806), 673; *Dudley* (1826), v.

III. Reading Associations' Discourse in Relation to their Town

This section will examine how associations related to their specific local circumstances, using the discourse of three reading associations selected for the comprehensive printed accounts that were published about them. The Hull Subscription Library was founded in 1775 in a prosperous port town, the Lewes Library Society was established in 1786 in the county town of Sussex, and the Cornwall Library and Literary Society was founded in 1792 in the seaport and market town of Truro. Around the time that these publications were produced, their local populations were 27,500 inhabitants in Hull;⁵⁹ around 5,000 inhabitants in Lewes;⁶⁰ and 11,239 in the town, borough and parishes of Truro.⁶¹ These three associations used language and ideas which were pertinent to the character of their locality, showing how the aspirations and discourse of literary sociability differed in accordance with local circumstances.

The Hull Subscription Library published two works, *An Address to the Subscribers to the Library at Hull, at the opening of the new rooms* (1801), and J. Crosse, *An Account of the Rise and Progress of the Subscription Library at Kingston-upon-Hull* (1810).⁶² The address sought to prove that 'commerce and literature have always gone hand in hand', citing ancient examples to support the modern assertion that 'some of our trading towns have done more in the last fifty years towards the encouragement of literature' than the ancient universities.⁶³ This reflected a general perception of the importance of commerce to Hull.⁶⁴ This commercial focus was highlighted in the representation of the library's members as men of business, industrious entrepreneurs contrasted with the lazy gentry, who despite their 'independency... scarcely ever engage in the discharge of public business'.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the members' nature as commercially-minded men of industry was portrayed as conditioning their reading practice: they sought the 'application of knowledge to useful and profitable purposes' and 'an

⁵⁹ E. Baines, *History, Directory & Gazetteer of the County of York*, 2 Vols (1822-1823), ii. 256.

⁶⁰ *Pigot & Co.'s National, London and Provincial Commercial Directory for 1832-34* (London, 1834), 1038.

⁶¹ *Pigot & Co.'s National Commercial Directory* (London, 1830), 169-170.

⁶² *An Address to the Subscribers to the Library at Hull*; Crosse, *Account*.

⁶³ *An Address to the Subscribers to the Library at Hull*, 3, 9.

⁶⁴ Baines, *Gazetteer of York*, ii. 248.

⁶⁵ *An Address to the Subscribers to the Library at Hull*, 9-10, 13.

useful object'.⁶⁶ This practical focus of purposeful reading was contrasted to the philosopher 'shut up in his study': the vigour and efficacy of tradesmen was thus lauded above the pontifications of scholars or the indolence of the gentry. In the account of the Hull Subscription Library, John Crosse argued for the 'solid and useful learning instilled into the minds of young persons' by the association, and noted that courses of lectures had been established 'on mechanics, chemistry, natural history, and subjects connected with commerce'.⁶⁷ The activities and self-representation of the Hull Subscription Library thus foregrounded the commercial identity and interests of its members. The society also aimed at the education of 'the rising generation, whose local situation and circumstances may adapt them for trade', and sought to 'stimulate the several corporations... for the improvement of the town'.⁶⁸ Thus, the Hull Subscription Library not only boasted of the 'generosity and benevolence... of the true English merchant' who characterised its membership, but also aimed to further sponsor the trade and urban government of their town.⁶⁹ This would enable them to 'live to see this Town the pride and boast of our country'.⁷⁰

The Lewes Library Society was the subject of a poem by John Button, published in 1804 and dedicated to the library members, who had sponsored its publication.⁷¹ The preface suggested that 'the man of business' would gain pleasure and recreation from reading, but no further commercial references were made.⁷² Instead, Button noted the occupation of members, including priests, teachers, doctors, grocers and lawyers: predominantly displaying county-town professionals, although also mentioning tradesmen.⁷³ However, in line with the argument of chapter three, these middling sorts were shown to be united through general intellectual pursuits, rather than specialised in professional knowledge. The association was portrayed as a place of calmness and civility, where 'faction, and ev'ry meaner passion cease, and all around be harmony and peace'.⁷⁴ The library is the place 'where Science holds her sway' and the members are 'by thirst of science led',

⁶⁶ Ibid., 10, 13.

⁶⁷ Crosse, *Account*, 4, 18.

⁶⁸ *An Address to the Subscribers to the Library at Hull*, 13, 15.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 15.

⁷¹ J. Button, *The Lewes Library Society; a Poem* (London, 1804).

⁷² Ibid., v.

⁷³ Ibid., 8-9.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 22.

prioritising the pursuit of knowledge above all other motivations.⁷⁵ Button wrote that the association's female members prized 'the polish'd mind, and virtuous heart' rather than 'the gay theatre, or splendid ball'.⁷⁶ This contrasts the fashionable, polite sociability of London or Bath with the virtuous character-building pursuits of this county town. Indeed, the poem began by setting the scene, near 'yonder ruins, where, in warlike pride... Montfort's sword victorious won the plain'.⁷⁷ This reference to the Battle of Lewes in 1264 foregrounded this repudiation of autocratic rule, and reminded the reader of Lewes' national significance. Lewes was also named as an 'ancient borough', and members were described as the 'sons' of this 'pop'lous site'.⁷⁸ Button's poem thus presented a civilised, congenial community of association members, united in a common pursuit of intellectual goals. However, this was not a metropolitan-derivative or even an ambiguously urbane project, but rather is placed within the context of Lewes' historical importance and the physical geography of its membership.

Finally, a range of materials on the Cornwall Library and Literary Society, also known as the Cornwall County Library, was included by Richard Polwhele in his *Language, Literature, and Literary Characters, of Cornwall* (1806). Polwhele recorded an advertisement in the *Sherborne Mercury* for 'establishing a public county library, and for illustrating the antiquities and natural history of the county of Cornwall'.⁷⁹ Polwhele suggested that the founders wanted to facilitate the writing of county histories, and they sought to acquire William Borlase's papers.⁸⁰ They also planned 'a museum, or repository of the minerals, fossils, ores, and other natural productions of the county', and requested that the gentry and clergymen send them accounts of local agriculture, weather, flora, superstitions and dialects.⁸¹ These scholarly endeavours had a practical end, in that ore specimens might 'suggest hints to the assayer for further improvements, even in the mines themselves', but were also a genteel pursuit which was 'preferable to either husbandry, or the sports and exercises of the field'.⁸² Rather than focusing on the town, Truro, in which this institution met, the members' sights were firmly set on the county framework. They made the Cornish

⁷⁵ Ibid., 2, 3.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 1.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 6, 8.

⁷⁹ R. Polwhele, *The Language, Literature, and Literary Characters, of Cornwall: with Illustrations from Devonshire* (London, 1806), 98.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 102-104.

⁸¹ Ibid., 100, 101.

⁸² Ibid., 99, 104.

Members of Parliament their trustees, they requested the patronage of the Duke of Cornwall, they adorned their books with the arms of the county, and they aimed to promote the 'interest', 'reputation' and the 'glory of the county of Cornwall'.⁸³

The antiquarian, genteel focus of this association relates to their adoption of a county framework. Only a handful of reading associations in this thesis incorporated the county into their name, including the Salisbury and Wiltshire Library, and the Hampshire Library Society. Other county libraries had particular professional inflections, such as the Lincolnshire Central Medical Book Society, or the Suffolk Medical Book Club. This suggests that the county was the appropriate geographical unit in which groups of scholarly or professional readers would gather: the specialised interests of these communities necessitated a larger catchment area. In the case of the Cornwall Library, their interest was in antiquarianism: for antiquarians, the county was a natural unit of study, linking to the governmental jurisdiction of the landed elite.⁸⁴ Like the Cornwall County Library, the Salisbury and Wiltshire Library collected geological specimens of local fossils, and donations to this collection were widely reported in Wiltshire and even Derby newspapers.⁸⁵ These anomalies serve to draw attention to the fact that almost all of the other associations chose to construct their identity around a town rather than a county framework. Rather than antiquarian interests, genealogical history or the scholarly researches of the gentry and clergy, most reading associations construed themselves in relation to the activities of the merchants or professionals which dominated their town community.

⁸³ Ibid., 98-103.

⁸⁴ R. Sweet, *Antiquaries: The Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London, 2004), 37.

⁸⁵ *The Bath Chronicle*, Dec. 28, 1820, Issue 3069; *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, May 16, 1822, Issue 332; *The Derby Mercury*, May 22, 1822, Issue 4689.

IV. Reading Associations' Contribution to Civic Identity

Reading associations not only drew upon a town's identity in their names and rhetoric, but also contributed to the construction of the material environment and the reputation of their locality. A common theme in reading associations' discourse was the idea of their involvement with, and value to, their local community. The Reading Permanent Library noted that it would be 'an inducement to strangers to take up their residence among us, and by so doing add to the commercial prosperity of the town'.⁸⁶ Such a strategy was thought to have succeeded in Manchester; the Portico Library argued that its building in Moseley Street had inspired a nearby commercial building, and they predicted more would follow.⁸⁷ John Clennell wrote to the *Philosophical Magazine*, announcing that the North Shields Subscription Library planned to build 'an elegant town clock, by which means this liberal institution will be in some degree assimilated to the convenience of North Shields'.⁸⁸ Reading associations thus presented themselves as solicitous for the welfare of their town, and contributing to its improvement.

Moving beyond their discursive claims, reading associations' commitment to their local town can be examined through evidence of their sponsorship of local literary works. At least seven future members of the Kilmarnock Library subscribed to Ure's *History of Rutherglen and East Kilbride*.⁸⁹ Eight individuals who would later form over a third of the Dursley Reading Society subscribed to Fosbroke's *Abstracts of Records and Manuscripts Respecting the County of Gloucester*.⁹⁰ Eight of the committee of the Sunderland Subscription Library listed in Garbutt's *Historical and Descriptive View of the Parishes of Monkwearmouth & Bishopwearmouth and the Port and Borough of Sunderland* subscribed to the text itself.⁹¹ Reading associations as collectivities could also subscribe to local histories, thus appearing as local patrons (and benefiting from their inclusion in the text's subscription

⁸⁶ *A Letter from the Chairman*, 1.

⁸⁷ *The Monthly Magazine; Or, British Register*, Vol. XXI Part I for 1806 (London, 1806), 205.

⁸⁸ *The Philosophical Magazine*, Vol. XXIX (London, 1808), 127-128.

⁸⁹ D. Ure, *The History of Rutherglen and East-Kilbride* (Glasgow, 1793).

⁹⁰ T. D. Fosbroke, *Abstracts of Records and Manuscripts Respecting the County of Gloucester* (Gloucester, 1807).

⁹¹ G. Garbutt, *A Historical and Descriptive View of the Parishes of Monkwearmouth and Bishopwearmouth and the Port and Borough of Sunderland* (Sunderland, 1819).

list). The Thetford Royal George Book Society, the Reading Society at Tewkesbury, the Richmond Literary Society, and the Richmond Book Society subscribed to local histories.⁹² The subscribers to Hutton's *History of Birmingham* included four book societies, denoted by the public houses at which they met within the town: at the Swan Inn, J. Free's, the Red Lion and the Chain in Bull Street.⁹³ Likewise, Phillips' *History and Antiquities of Shrewsbury* was sponsored by the Talbot [Inn] Reading Society of Shrewsbury.⁹⁴ The names of these associations embedded them in the public spaces of the town, which was further consolidated through this textual record of their urban participation and sponsorship.

As well as patronising print culture, reading associations could be involved in local theatre. Newspapers advertised theatrical performances sponsored by reading associations, in Newark, Spalding, Lowestoft, Eye, Bungay, Norwich, and Dereham.⁹⁵ Reading associations also contributed to philanthropic causes in their immediate locality, constructing themselves as paternalistic supporters of needy locals. The King's Head Book Club and the White Hart Book Club in Norfolk donated money to the family of a deceased city surgeon.⁹⁶ A Norwich book club presented money to a coach guard, who had saved the lives of many by preventing the Newmarket mail coach crossing a bridge, which was flooded thirty seconds later.⁹⁷ Notices about these activities was given in local newspapers, informing readers about the patronage and philanthropy of reading associations.

Reading associations also had a symbolic value, attesting to the character of the locality. The Hull Subscription Library's president praised the 'spirit of enquiry which this meeting announces'.⁹⁸ On a tour through the United Kingdom, Richard Phillips used reading

⁹² T. Martin, *The History of the Town of Thetford, in the Counties of Norfolk and Suffolk, from the Earliest Accounts to the Present Time* (London, 1779); W. Dyde, *The History and Antiquities of Tewkesbury*, Second edn (Tewkesbury, 1798); C. Clarkson, *The History of Richmond Including a Description of Other Remains of Antiquity in the Neighbourhood* (Richmond, 1814).

⁹³ W. Hutton, *An History of Birmingham, to the End of the Year 1780* (Birmingham, 1781).

⁹⁴ T. Phillips, *The History and Antiquities of Shrewsbury: From Its First Foundation to the Present Time* (Shrewsbury, 1779).

⁹⁵ *The Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, Dec. 11, 1812, Issue 4264; *The Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, Sept. 12, 1828, Issue 6947; *The Ipswich Journal*, Sept. 19, 1807, Issue 3880; *The Norfolk Chronicle: or, the Norwich Gazette*, June 21, 1777, Issue 429; *The Norfolk Chronicle: or, the Norwich Gazette*, June 19, 1779, Issue 525; *The Norfolk Chronicle: or, the Norwich Gazette*, June 19, 1790, Issue 1012; *The Norfolk Chronicle: or, the Norwich Gazette*, Aug. 21, 1790, Issue 1021; *The Norfolk Chronicle: or, the Norwich Gazette*, June 9, 1792, Issue 1167; *The Norfolk Chronicle: or, the Norwich Gazette*, Oct. 31, 1795, Issue 1341.

⁹⁶ *The Norfolk Chronicle: or, the Norwich Gazette*, Oct. 15, 1796, Issue 1391; *The Norfolk Chronicle: or, the Norwich Gazette*, Oct. 1, 1796, Issue 1389.

⁹⁷ *The Norfolk Chronicle and Norwich Gazette*, June 5, 1824, Issue 2819.

⁹⁸ *An Address to the Subscribers to the Library at Hull*, 14.

associations as a measure of 'the spirit of enquiry' in Olney, and the 'improving liberality' of dissenters in Northampton.⁹⁹ Similarly, 'two book societies... proved that Loughborough is a literary place'.¹⁰⁰ Thus, aside from their practical advantages, reading associations were seen as evidence of local character, and of local improvement through their dissemination of knowledge. At the Wells Book Society annual dinner, a speech was given which 'eulogized the benefits and advantages derived by the community from societies of this nature'.¹⁰¹ People outside of reading associations also wrote of their utility to the broader community: in the first *Statistical Account* of Scotland, the public library at Montrose was described as a place of learning and improvement, and it was more generally presumed that such institutions would 'diffuse a taste for learning'.¹⁰² Newspapers similarly expected that reading associations in the local area would bring 'beneficial consequences to the community', and 'promote the interest of the community at large'.¹⁰³

Reading associations were absorbed into their towns' identity, and indeed were touted as key institutions. The diarist Thomas Asline Ward noted of Sheffield in 1819 that 'the town seems to be too poor to contain two large libraries': whilst this was presumably a practical consideration of the availability of subscription money for two institutions, it shows that successfully maintaining such institutions was a sign of prosperity.¹⁰⁴ The Kilmarnock Library received its own heading in the opening civic listings of the town directory, showing its integration amongst local institutions, and its social visibility.¹⁰⁵ The library was also claimed by the town in the *New Statistical Account*, which announced that 'the town library is very valuable'.¹⁰⁶ The North Shields Subscription Library was described in the newspaper as 'the ornament of that town', and the Hereford Reading Society was expected to be 'an honour to

⁹⁹ R. Phillips, *A Personal Tour through the United Kingdom; describing Living Objects, and Contemporaneous Interests. Number 1 Bedfordshire-Northamptonshire, Leicestershire* (London, 1828), 29, 36.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁰¹ *The Norfolk Chronicle and Norwich Gazette*, Apr. 15, 1820, Issue 1615.

¹⁰² J. Sinclair, *The Statistical Account of Scotland. Drawn up from the Communications of the Ministers of the Different Parishes*, 21 Vols (Edinburgh, 1791-1799), v. 34.

¹⁰³ *The Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, Sept. 2, 1825, Issue 4928; *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, Dec. 8, 1827, Issue 3893.

¹⁰⁴ *Peeps into the Past being Passages from the Diary of Thomas Asline Ward*, ed. A. B. Bell (Sheffield, 1909), 251.

¹⁰⁵ *Pigot & Co.'s New Commercial Directory of Scotland for 1825-6* (London, 1825), 238-239.

¹⁰⁶ *The New Statistical Account of Scotland by the Ministers of the Respective Parishes Volume 5 Ayr-Bute* (Edinburgh, 1845), 561.

the place'.¹⁰⁷ Lynn Subscription Library was described as 'a subject of congratulation to the town and neighbourhood'.¹⁰⁸ These writers portrayed associations as an adornment, emphasising their symbolic value as figureheads of Enlightenment rather than the more tangible improving interventions that associations sometimes claimed for themselves.

Nonetheless, newspaper advertisements show that reading associations had become a desirable and advantageous characteristic of the local area. An advertisement for a mansion-house listed amongst its advantages, that it was in a 'very genteel Neighbourhood' which included a 'Book-club every Month'.¹⁰⁹ Likewise, a house for let in Sandwich was noted to not only have an observatory on its roof, but a book society close by.¹¹⁰ Joanna Baillie wrote of 'our book club here' in Hampstead, despite admitting that she was not involved; she later managed to get a book proposed, 'though I do not belong'.¹¹¹ When Samuel Curwen visited a library in Bristol, he was unsure whether it was 'the City, Merchants or a private society's, I enquired not, nor was told'.¹¹² As a visitor to the town, he recorded this library as part of his experience of Bristol, regardless of its actual institutional connection to the town. Reading associations were thus configured as part of the town community, even by outsiders who did not belong to them; and were certainly believed to contribute to the renown if not the reality of life in their locales.

V. Conclusion

Reading associations attested to a contemporary belief in the relationship between private virtue and public benefit. The Hampshire Library promoted itself as 'publicly and individually advantageous', highlighting the mutual relationship between personal and

¹⁰⁷ *The Newcastle Courant etc*, Nov. 7, 1807, Issue 6839; *Hereford Journal*, Dec. 07, 1814, Issue 2229.

¹⁰⁸ *The Norfolk Chronicle and Norwich Gazette*, Oct. 9, 1824, Issue 2837.

¹⁰⁹ *The Norfolk Chronicle: or, the Norwich Gazette*, Dec. 2, 1786, Issue 373.

¹¹⁰ *Daily Advertiser*, Feb. 3, 1773, Issue 13141.

¹¹¹ *The Collected Letters of Joanna Baillie*, ed. J. B. Slagle, 2 Vols (London, 1999), ii. 1119, 634.

¹¹² *The Journal of Samuel Curwen, Loyalist*, ed. A. Oliver, 2 Vols (Cambridge, MA, 1972), i. 406.

general improvement.¹¹³ The Cornwall County Library spoke of 'when private unites with public utility',¹¹⁴ and the Hull Subscription Library explained that reading was not a 'selfish luxury', but aimed at 'the general good of society'.¹¹⁵ Conversely, the 'fellow-citizens' and 'literary characters' of Aberdeen were blamed for the absence of a literary institution there, and a newspaper correspondent wished that they 'had more concern for the improvement of the community at large'.¹¹⁶ The investment that people made in reading associations was conceived not only as personal improvement or enjoyment, but was a philanthropic act by which their wider community would also be improved. This suggests that a strict interpretation of 'public' and 'private' as separate spheres or experiences does not reflect contemporary perceptions. An individual's actions were not private, but had collective repercussions: the public good could be collapsed into the private endeavours of an individual.

This relationship between individual improvement and the public good is exemplified by the attention which societies gave to key members, who were exemplars of improvement. Newspaper advertisements were used to announce the associations' gratitude to their key participants. The Ipswich Book Club gave Reverend William Layton a gold medal, in thanks for his 'active exertions in the management of its concerns'.¹¹⁷ The personal philanthropy of individuals was commemorated in associations' catalogues, by acknowledging donated books.¹¹⁸ Perhaps less charitably, both Dr Adair and Dr Peebles were thanked in the Ayr Library minutes for donating their own publications to the library, a form of self-commemoration.¹¹⁹ By such gifts, and public announcement of them, reading associations elevated their main patrons as worthy local citizens. This instituted a reciprocal cycle of reading association involvement leading to accolades, which in turn legitimated and honoured the institution itself as the crucible of this worthy behaviour.

As well as announcing the virtues that were being cultivated in reading associations, such practices of commemoration contributed to the creation of community and civic

¹¹³ *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle*, Sept. 3, 1804, Issue 256.

¹¹⁴ Polwhele, *Cornwall*, 99.

¹¹⁵ *Address to the Subscribers to the Library at Hull*, 13.

¹¹⁶ *The Monthly Magazine; Or, British Register*, Vol. XXI Part 1 for 1806 (London, 1806), 292.

¹¹⁷ *The Ipswich Journal*, Oct. 9, 1813, Issue 4177. See also *Berkshire Chronicle*, Jan. 12, 1828, Issue 155; *Hereford Journal*, Apr. 2, 1800, Issue 1548; *Peeps into the Past*, 332.

¹¹⁸ Ayr (1802); Kilmarnock (1811); Tavistock (1810); Haworth (1820).

¹¹⁹ ACL, 027.441 Air Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776-1830, 96.

memory. Within the Birmingham Book Society, a deceased member's place was offered to his son, 'as a small testimony of the respect they feel for the memory of their late member'.¹²⁰ Commemoration was not only for the community of the reading association, but also functioned as a memorial for people that were beloved within the broader town: John Marsh reflected that the death of Sir Murray was a 'loss to the corporation and our Book society' as well as 'the society in general of Chichester & its vicinity'.¹²¹ The founders of societies were particularly vaunted: the original subscribers were sometimes listed in its later catalogues, as a form of print commemoration for the benefit of future generations.¹²² The Hull Subscription Library wished to use a seal featuring the likeness of their founder to make the library's tickets, and also acquired a portrait of him.¹²³ The Lewes Library Society poem spoke of the generosity, virtue and wisdom of the founder Joseph Ridge, and a newspaper correspondent who wrote about the Moseley-Street Library in Manchester was pleased to honour 'the memory of [its founder] my late worthy friend Mr. Robert Robinson'.¹²⁴ John Clennell's account of the North Shields Subscription Library described it as a 'lasting monument' and a 'perpetual memorial' to its founders;¹²⁵ the Hull Subscription Library was construed as a 'valuable bequest',¹²⁶ and the Lewes Library Society was described as a 'monument' and a 'treasury' for 'when the original founders have sunk into the grave'.¹²⁷ Reading associations thus contributed to the commemoration of important local figures, generating a civic memory of their locality's improvers, philanthropists and luminaries. This was also to the benefit of their community: a letter to the *Gentleman's Magazine* suggested that the Liverpool Athenaeum 'reflects great credit on the founders, as well as on the inhabitants'.¹²⁸ The founders and stalwarts of reading associations were thus represented as civic heroes, whose reputation vicariously benefited their townsmen.

The discourse of the reading associations examined in this chapter is replete with references to their posterity and longevity, perhaps demonstrating the self-interested hopes

¹²⁰ LBAS, MS2571/1/1/1 Book Club Minutes, 10th May 1820.

¹²¹ *The John Marsh Journals: The Life and Times of a Gentleman Composer (1752-1828) Volume II*, ed. B. Robins (Hillsdale, 2013), 272-273.

¹²² *Ayr* (1802); *Kilmarnock* (1811); *Whitby* (1814).

¹²³ Crosse, *Account*, 7, 22.

¹²⁴ Button, *Lewes*, 3; *The Monthly Magazine; Or, British Register*, Vol. XXI Part I for 1806 (London, 1806), 205.

¹²⁵ *The Philosophical Magazine*, Vol. XXIX (London, 1808), 128.

¹²⁶ Crosse, *Account*, 4.

¹²⁷ Button, *Lewes*, vii-viii.

¹²⁸ *The Gentleman's Magazine: and, Historical Chronicle*, Vol. 70, Part II (London, 1800), 1053.

of their members, but also their attitude towards their own forebears. The associations were concerned with their long-term legacy.¹²⁹ The Dalkeith Library wished to be 'useful to succeeding ages'.¹³⁰ The Kilmarnock Library and the Paisley Library were both indissoluble, as it was 'not for their own advantage only, but also in the view of improving their posterity'.¹³¹ Such associations did not see themselves as temporary alliances of readers, but rather as perpetual pillars of the community, which were an enduring testament to the improving mentalities of their founders. Their confidence in the perpetuity of their community allowed them to plan ongoing routines of commemoration. The institution of the anniversary dinner was widespread, as was the publishing of catalogues and the keeping of minute books, which left a documentary legacy. It was in building projects that commemoration reached its apogee. The Gibraltar Garrison Library placed a marble tablet on their building commemorating the king and governors under whose command the building had been erected.¹³² The Hull Subscription Library went one step further, depositing in their building's foundation stone 'a vial, hermetically sealed, containing a roll of parchment, together with several coins of his present Majesty'.¹³³ This time capsule included a note which recorded the names of the members who had led the project, and the price of timber, labour, and beef at the time. This was to be a lasting endorsement of the success of these library members, as well as explaining the local social and economic context in which they operated.

Reading associations thus drew upon their locality for their names and discourse, and united people from the rural hinterland into predominantly urban institutions. The associations then fed back into the reputation and identity of their locality, featuring in newspapers and town histories as evidence of the character of the place. A further important service to their local community was their commemoration of individuals, contributing to the civic memory of their forebears, and consciously investing in the reading association as a bequest to future generations.

¹²⁹ Manley suggests that their permanence was important: K. A. Manley, *Books, Borrowers and Shareholders: Scottish Circulating and Subscription Libraries before 1825: A Survey and Listing* (Edinburgh, 2012), 40.

¹³⁰ *Dalkeith* (1798), 3.

¹³¹ BMC, AA/DC/180/1 Kilmarnock Public Library Minutes 1797-1823, 11; *Paisley* (1802), 1.

¹³² *A Catalogue of Books in the Gibraltar Garrison Library, Established in the Year 1793* (Gibraltar, 1821), viii.

¹³³ Crosse, *Account*, 12-14.

Chapter Seven

Associations and the Making of National Culture

I. Introduction

The long eighteenth century is a particularly important period in the history of state and nation creation, beginning with the legislative changes of the 1707 Act of Union with Scotland and ending with the 1800 Acts of Union with Ireland. Beyond this high-political narrative of union, historians have focused on the extent to which these legislative changes were constitutive of, or buttressed by, contemporary perceptions of national identity.¹ Most notably, Linda Colley argued for the importance of wars in creating a British identity, defined against a catholic, usually French 'other'.² This 'other' presupposes a homogenous British 'self': but an unresolved question within the historiography of British national identity is the relationship of 'England' to 'Britain', and the extent to which 'Britishness' was an imperial, anglocentric identity which subsumed Welsh, Irish and Scottish cultures.³ Historians tend to assume that there were 'strong Anglicising tendencies at work in Scottish culture and politics', but the exact mechanisms and processes of this cultural convergence are not

¹ For example, J. Hoppit (ed.), *Parliaments, Nations and Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1660-1860* (Manchester, 2003); L. Brockliss and D. Eastwood (eds), *A Union of Multiple Identities: The British Isles, c.1750-c.1850* (Manchester, 1997).

² L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (London, 1992).

³ E. Evans, 'Englishness and Britishness: National identities, c.1790-c.1870', in A. Grant and K. J. Stringer (eds), *Uniting the Kingdom?: The Making of British History* (London, 1995), 223-243; S. J. Connolly, 'Varieties of Britishness: Ireland, Scotland and Wales in the Hanoverian State', in Grant and Stringer, *Uniting the Kingdom?*, 193-207.

explained.⁴ This chapter will illuminate one aspect of contemporary culture, its reading and associational practices, to see whether English and Scottish readers perceived a cultural commonality between their nations.

Literary historians have argued for the 'central role of literature in defining national identity', particularly focusing on the literary output of marginalised cultures within Britain.⁵ Romanticism is often seen as an appropriation of celtic or bardic roots for English audiences, furthering the interpretation of a hegemonic and imperialist Anglo-British culture in this period.⁶ However, the success of their literary productions enabled Scottish authors to 'negotiate with Anglocentricity in their writings'.⁷ Scottish authors are said to have been united by discourses of sentiment, which they employed as 'compensation for political dispossession'.⁸ Leith Davis' study places Scottish authors in dialogue with English contemporaries, arguing that authors were conscious of their textual role in making, and re-making, the union.⁹ Popular authors and poets such as Smollett, Burns, Scott and Boswell are often examined for their conception of national identity, which is implicitly assumed to have had particular importance because of the popularity of their works. Yet while studies of cultural production may indicate the nationalist bent of authorial intentions, they fail to consider the effect or representativeness of these identities. The literary-production narrative of Anglo-Scottish identity, and the cultural negotiations which created it, must be supplemented by a history of the ordinary readers of these works. Thus, rather than focusing on the contents and encoded nationalisms of popular texts, this chapter will analyse practices of print consumption. This chapter seeks to recover the physical mechanisms of cultural integration, providing a reception-oriented perspective which complements the high

⁴ B. Harris, 'The Scots, The Westminster Parliament, and the British State in the Eighteenth Century', in Hoppit, *Parliaments*, 133. See also A. Murdoch, *British History 1660-1832: National Identity and Local Culture* (Basingstoke, 1998), 98; L. Brockliss and D. Eastwood, 'Introduction: A Union of Multiple Identities', in Brockliss and Eastwood, *Union*, 4; M. Pittock, *Inventing and Resisting Britain: Cultural Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1685-1789* (Basingstoke, 1997), 130. Meanwhile, J. Smyth, *The Making of the United Kingdom 1660-1800: State, Religion and Identity in Britain and Ireland* (London, 2001), xiv contends that 'closer political integration was not accompanied by uniform cultural assimilation or anglicisation'.

⁵ K. Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton, 1997), xi.

⁶ G. Carruthers and A. Rawes, 'Introduction: Romancing the Celt', in G. Carruthers and A. Rawes (eds), *English Romanticism and the Celtic World* (Cambridge, 2003), 1-19; R. Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*, Second edn (Edinburgh, 2000), 168.

⁷ Crawford, *Devolving*, 6.

⁸ J. Shields, *Sentimental Literature and Anglo-Scottish Identity, 1745-1820* (Cambridge, 2010), 1.

⁹ L. Davis, *Acts of Union: Scotland and the Literary Negotiation of the British Nation, 1707-1830* (Stanford, 1998).

intellectual history of authorship. Did print develop a common Anglo-Scottish culture in this period, through shared reading patterns, and conceptions of a reading public?

Firstly, this chapter will begin by examining the structures and practices of English and Scottish associations, to ascertain whether reading associations can be considered a common cultural practice. Secondly, this chapter will examine the reading preferences of English and Scottish associations, in order to examine the role of the reading association in Benedict Anderson's theory of an imagined community created through simultaneous reading. Thirdly, this chapter will assess whether the literary culture of associational readers was consciously 'national', or merely a metropolitan export. Finally, the chapter will conclude by evaluating the extent to which reading associations contributed to, and identified with, the construction of an interconnected reading public.

II. Associational Structures in Scotland and England

Historians of reading associations have usually predicated their studies on national units, separating 'English' and 'Scottish' associations, despite the countries' shared language and parliamentary union in this period.¹⁰ In terms of associational structure, some historians have argued for starkly different practices either side of Hadrian's Wall, as Scotland is said to have mainly instituted permanent libraries rather than ephemeral book clubs.¹¹ Scottish exceptionalism is most strongly posited by Keith Manley, who maintains that 'in Scotland, reading was a more serious business'; associational rules were 'far more strict and complex'; and 'sobriety was normally the order of the day', distancing Scottish practice from the

¹⁰ e.g. D. Allan, *A Nation of Readers: The Lending Library in Georgian England* (London, 2008); M. R. M. Towsey, *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment: Books and Their Readers in Provincial Scotland, 1750-1820* (Leiden, 2010); K. A. Manley, *Books, Borrowers and Shareholders: Scottish Circulating and Subscription Libraries before 1825: A Survey and Listing* (Edinburgh, 2012); V. Dunstan, 'Reading Habits in Scotland circa 1750-1820', Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2010.

¹¹ e.g. T. Kelly, *Early Public Libraries: A History of Public Libraries in Great Britain before 1850* (London, 1966), 141.

supposed conviviality of English institutions.¹² Certainly, the Scottish records considered in this thesis, and those more broadly available, are predominantly of permanent institutions rather than dividing book clubs, although the lack of extant sources about book clubs does not prove their absence in Scotland. However, Manley's broader characterisation of Scottish associations and readers as more serious will be shown to be a groundless assumption.¹³

Bob Harris and Charles McKean argue that 'the rapidity and extent of the rise of Scottish subscription libraries was very striking', and John Crawford likewise argues that subscription libraries were 'Scotland's distinctive contribution to library history', although other historians calculate that there were fifteen Scottish subscription libraries, and at least fourteen English subscription libraries, before 1790.¹⁴ William St Clair argues that the membership of Scottish reading associations was 'more socially mixed', although one of the institutions he quotes to support this statement was a free library, and thus does not form a helpful comparison to English associational practice.¹⁵ Clark suggests there were fewer Scottish book clubs because of their greater number of town and circulating libraries; yet, contradicting this, Mark Towsey and Vivienne Dunstan remark upon the tardiness of Scotland's development of circulating libraries.¹⁶ Evidently, Scottish exceptionality has been postulated on a range of issues, but there is a lack of comparative research to validate these assertions. This thesis has sought to redress some of this ambiguity by examining Scottish and English associations alongside one another, seeking to draw out the commonality of their practices and cultures.

Contemporaries portrayed the associational landscape of England and Scotland somewhat differently to this historiographical divide between serious Scottish permanent libraries and ephemeral English clubs. In 1821, *The Edinburgh Magazine* estimated that reading societies (including proprietary libraries, book clubs, magazine societies and circulating libraries) existed in England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales in the proportion of 10:4:2:1.¹⁷ Whilst this did not reflect on the exact number of permanent or temporary

¹² Manley, *Books*, 2, 5, 120.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁴ B. Harris and C. McKean, *The Scottish Town in the Age of the Enlightenment 1740-1820* (Edinburgh, 2014), 388; J. Crawford, 'Reading and Book Use in Eighteenth Century Scotland', *The Bibliothek*, Vol. 19 (1994), 32; Towsey, *Reading*, 58; Kelly, *Early*, 126.

¹⁵ W. St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge, 2004), 251.

¹⁶ P. Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford, 2000), 110; Towsey, *Reading*, 95; Dunstan, 'Reading', 31.

¹⁷ *The Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany*, July 1, 1821, 66-67.

collections in Scotland, it noted that the first permanent library was at Birmingham, failing to distinguish an English book-club culture from a Scottish preference for serious libraries. Furthermore, a letter written to the *Monthly Magazine* in 1805 expressed shock at the lack of subscription libraries in Aberdeen, Inverness, Banff, and Peterhead.¹⁸ An Aberdonian sympathised with this letter, arguing that ‘the want of societies for scientific and literary improvement has been long felt in many considerable towns in Scotland’.¹⁹ The *Statistical Account* had complained at the lack of ‘any tolerable public library’ in Dundee.²⁰ Evidently, the Scots’ supposedly superior and more serious institutions were not a ubiquitous source of national pride at the time. Indeed, a letter to *The Scots Magazine* complained about the lack of Scottish book clubs, noting that they were found in even the smallest English towns.²¹ Furthermore, whilst permanent institutions (i.e. associations which did not sell off their book stock) were the norm, there are some examples of Scottish reading associations which met with short-term purposes in mind. The Peterhead Library disposed of books, using this sale money to acquire more.²² The Nithsdale Circulating Library committed to associate for three years, after which the books were sold off, much like an English book club; the Ayr, Newton and Wallacetown Library originally agreed to associate for a period of five years; and the Kelso Library similarly drew up a contract for a ten-year period.²³ These examples cast doubt upon the utility of delineating separate associational cultures for England and Scotland, based on institutional forms alone.

One of the specific differences in associational practice which Manley cites is the greater complexity of Scottish associations’ rules, particularly regarding inheritance.²⁴ However, this does not seem to be true: the *Statistical Account* explained that at Duns Library, ‘the shares are transferable, like any other property’, and this was true of most

¹⁸ *The Monthly Magazine; Or, British Register*, Vol. XX Part II for 1805 (London, 1805), 523.

¹⁹ *The Monthly Magazine; Or, British Register*, Vol. XXI Part I for 1806 (London, 1806), 292.

²⁰ J. Sinclair, *The Statistical Account of Scotland. Drawn up from the Communications of the Ministers of the Different Parishes*, 21 Vols (Edinburgh, 1791-1799), viii. 244.

²¹ *The Scots Magazine and Edinburgh Literary Miscellany*, Apr. 1, 1804, 262.

²² *Report from the Select Committee on Public Libraries; together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence and Appendix* (London, 1849), 201.

²³ J. Sinclair, *The Statistical Account of Scotland. Drawn up from the Communications of the Ministers of the Different Parishes*, 21 Vols (Edinburgh, 1791-1799), iii. 597-600; Newton (1814), 1; *Diary of George Ridpath, Minister of Stichel, 1755-1761*, ed. J. Balfour Paul (Edinburgh, 1922), 349-350.

²⁴ Manley, *Books*, 5.

proprietary associations in England and Scotland.²⁵ The Halifax Circulating Library noted that in case of death, 'Share[s] shall become the Property of his eldest Child'; the Wigtown Subscription Library decided likewise that intestate members' shares passed to 'his eldest Son and failing Sons to his eldest Daughter'.²⁶ At the Kilmarnock Library, shares were to be transferred by a missive letter or written statement, and, similarly, candidates to the Dursley Reading Society had to be nominated in writing.²⁷ In English and some Scottish associations, other formal admissions procedures of balloting were employed, giving overtones of community approval rather than legal transfer.²⁸ The rules and structures of associations, particularly when considering subscription or permanent libraries across England and Scotland, were geared to the same ends, and employed similar means. Indeed, the most striking difference in organisational structures is simply a matter of vocabulary: some Scottish associations called their committee 'curators',²⁹ and their president 'preses', although even this was by no means a distinct and uniform Scottish practice.³⁰

In terms of the 'serious business' of associations, two templates for associational meetings indicate the similarity of their concerns. The template for the meetings of the Paisley Library Society called for them to elect a president; read the minutes of the last general meeting; elect curators; vote on books; read the minutes of the curators' meetings; and examine the treasurer's accounts, followed by any other business.³¹ The Huntingdon Book Club's agenda involved collecting forfeits and subscriptions; proposing and balloting for new candidates; altering or instituting new laws; proposing books; and choosing books to

²⁵ J. Sinclair, *The Statistical Account of Scotland. Drawn up from the Communications of the Ministers of the Different Parishes*, 21 Vols (Edinburgh, 1791-1799), iv. 391. Also *Paisley* (1802), 5 'by sale, gift or will'; *Newton* (1814), 4 by sale, gift or inheritance; *Ayr* (1802), 4 'by sale, free gift or will' with letter and consent of committee. For comparable legislation in English associations, see *Leeds* (1785), 92; *Bristol* (1790), 5; *Macclesfield* (1796), 37 can 'give, sell or bequeath'; *York Book Society* (1797), 6.

²⁶ *Halifax* (1786); HL, MS 5/27 Wigtown Subscription Library, 3.

²⁷ BMC, AA/DC/180/1 Kilmarnock Public Library Minutes 1797-1823, 5; *Dursley* (1818), 5.

²⁸ *Edinburgh* (1823), 3; HL, MS 5/27 Wigtown Subscription Library, 40; *Poole* (1806), 665-668; *Scarborough* (1806), 670-671; *A Letter from the Chairman*, 4; *Tavistock* (1810); *Dursley* (1818), 5; CAC, WPR/59/1A Kendal Book Club Rules, 7.

²⁹ 'Curators' at BMC, AA/DC/180/1 Kilmarnock Public Library Minutes 1797-1823, 35; *Kelso* (1790), 69; *Glasgow* (1810), viii. 'Committee' at WLA, WA1/1/1/1 Greenock Library Minute Book 1794-1815, 1; HL, MS 5/27 Wigtown Subscription Library, 3; ACL, 027.441 Air Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776-1830, 13; *Dalkeith* (1798), 6; *Edinburgh* (1823), 1. *Paisley* (1802), 7 refers to both 'Committee' and 'Curators'.

³⁰ 'Preses' at WLA, WA1/1/1/1 Greenock Library Minute Book 1794-1815, 1; HL, MS 5/27 Wigtown Subscription Library, 2; ACL, 027.441 Air Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776-1830, 1; *Kelso* (1790), 69; *Glasgow* (1810), ix. 'President' at BMC, AA/DC/180/1 Kilmarnock Public Library Minutes 1797-1823, 1; *Dalkeith* (1798), 6; *Edinburgh* (1823), 2; *Paisley* (1802), 11.

³¹ *Paisley* (1802), 15-16.

borrow.³² In the official templates for society business, there is no ‘conviviality’ in English associations that was absent for the Scots. Furthermore, other sources attest to the conviviality of Scottish associations. Peter Forbes wrote a song to be sung at the anniversary dinner of the Dalkeith Subscription Library, and expected a ‘joyful night’ of ‘rantin’ sangs an’ rhymin’ flight’ at the Select Library’s anniversary dinner.³³ The Inshewan Reading Society minutes of January 1825 reported that, after concluding the society’s business, they shared whisky toddy together, leading to ‘many appropriate toasts’ and the singing of ‘many national airs with real Scotch glee’.³⁴ Ridpath, of the Kelso Subscription Library, recorded a library meeting that went on until 12pm: the lateness of the hour may have been due to weighty committee business, but equally could suggest that the members enjoyed one another’s company, as in these other examples.³⁵ There is little substantiation for the suggestion that Scottish reading associations were ‘more serious’ than English ones, particularly as this convivial element of associations is least likely to survive in the records.

Throughout this thesis, English and Scottish institutions have been examined together, without evidence of contradictions in their practices or purposes. The most frequently-cited purpose of Anglo-Scottish associations was intellectual improvement, and this was true of Scottish associations alone; the advantage most often touted was their financial savings, which was also true of the Scottish associations alone. The rule of law was central to associations throughout this sample, and was consistently cited and upheld by both English and Scottish associations. The conclusions regarding the involvement of women and families are still applicable even when only considering the Scottish associations within the dataset: the average proportion of women in Scottish associations was 5.45%, compared to the 8% average across across Anglo-Scottish associations. The proportion of family in Scottish associations in my dataset was 36.5%; across the Anglo-Scottish sample, the average was 25%. The ethos, practices and social organisation of associations thus seems to be consistent, rendering English and Scottish associations part of a shared associational movement, whose members engaged in similar cultural practices. Overall, it

³² *Huntingdon* (1793), 7.

³³ P. Forbes, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Edinburgh, 1812), 82, 148-150.

³⁴ From Inshewan Reading Society, *Minutes, 1810-1854* [Typescript in Perth and Kinross County Library], quoted in W. R. Aitken, *A History of the Public Library movement in Scotland to 1955* (Glasgow, 1971), 314.

³⁵ *Ridpath*, 115.

seems that the purported differences in Scottish associationalism are, at most, a restatement of the structural differences between subscription libraries and book clubs. However, contemporaries did not view this as a testament to the Scots' more 'serious reading', but complained about the absence of more flexible institutions, particularly for those in remote areas. Associational life was a shared cultural practice, and a common mechanism of literary culture, which united English and Scottish readers. How conscious were they of this commonality?

III. Literary Tastes and the Print Community

Print is often cited as a transformative and integrative element in the changing culture of this period.³⁶ Its relationship to developing national sentiment has been most stridently posited by Benedict Anderson, who contended that 'imagined communities' were formed by novels and newspapers, which helped readers to conceive of themselves as part of a community, along with other anonymous readers who read in the same 'clocked, calendrical time'.³⁷ He suggests that the political community was imagined, because the majority of citizens do not have active contact with all of their compatriots.³⁸ Instead, national community was achieved through print, which united readers in self-aware, synchronised rhythms of newspaper-reading.³⁹ In historical writing, the operation, dissemination and homogenising force of print is often assumed rather than proven, with occasional caveats about the levels of literacy within the population. Taking this definition of the 'community' as united not only by shared (print) knowledge but also the simultaneity of reading practice as a common

³⁶ R. Sweet, 'Local Identities and a National Parliament, c. 1688-1835', in Hoppit, *Parliaments*, 49; Murdoch, *British History*, 8; D. Wahrman, 'National Society, Communal Culture: An Argument about the Recent Historiography of Eighteenth-Century Britain', *Social History*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Jan., 1992), 44-45; L. Colley, 'Whose Nation? Class and National Consciousness in Britain 1750-1830', *Past and Present*, Vol. 113, No. 1 (Nov., 1986), 101.

³⁷ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised edn (London, 2006), 25-26, 35.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

behaviour, this chapter seeks to uncover whether English and Scottish associations contributed to the realisation of this cultural community. This builds upon the research of David Allan, who examined English readers' responses to Scottish authors, and argued that this reading 'allowed notions of common Britishness to flourish'.⁴⁰

Historians are divided as to whether the English and the Scots shared a common literary culture and reading interests. Dunstan and Crawford suggest that the reading interests of individuals and institutions were similar either side of the border.⁴¹ It has also been argued that the middling-sort members of English and Scottish associations would have had more in common with each other than with less affluent people in their local area.⁴² This leads Towsey to suggest that associational reading was just as enlightening for English as for Scottish readers, despite the latter's regional associations with enlightenment thought.⁴³ Yet Towsey's analysis of private libraries suggests that Scots purchased books patriotically, while Burns' *Poems* were found in less than a quarter of English private libraries.⁴⁴ The same study suggests that the Scots were 'more eager consumers' of home-grown conjectural history and common-sense philosophy.⁴⁵ Harris and McKean argue for a developing Scots-British culture rather than a surrender to English norms, suggesting that 'Burns and the Bible were prominent features on many a Scottish bookshelf'.⁴⁶ Were readers in English and Scottish associations interested in the same texts, or were there distinct reading trends? How does this relate to the diffusion of culture within Great Britain?

Periodicals are often said to have united their anglophone readers into a national community, and the standards of taste which they purveyed became a touchstone for all aspiring critics.⁴⁷ St Clair cites the *Monthly Magazine*, and the *Critical, Edinburgh* and *Quarterly Review*, as integral publications which created the synchronised reading of this national 'imagined community' of readers.⁴⁸ Production statistics about the growth of such

⁴⁰ D. Allan, *Making British Culture: English Readers and the Scottish Enlightenment, 1740-1830* (Abingdon, 2008), 238.

⁴¹ J. Crawford, 'Reading and Book Use in 18th Century Scotland', *The Bibliothek*, Vol. 19 (1994), 36; Dunstan, 'Reading', 96.

⁴² D. Allan, 'Provincial Readers and Book Culture in the Scottish Enlightenment: the Perth Library, 1784-c.1800', *The Library*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (2002), 383; Dunstan, 'Reading', 111.

⁴³ Towsey, *Reading*, 89.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 41, 297.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

⁴⁶ Harris and McKean, *The Scottish Town*, 498.

⁴⁷ St Clair, *Nation*, 254; Towsey, *Reading*, 82-3; Allan, *Making British Culture*, 25-35.

⁴⁸ St Clair, *Nation*, 254.

periodicals do not, however, attest to their even and unifying dispersion through the country. In order to determine whether periodicals united English and Scottish associational readers, I have analysed the same selection of 30 catalogues used in chapter one, which originate from 1779 to 1829.⁴⁹ I searched for high-circulation works in order to chart their institutional reception, focusing on the original works of politeness, the *Tatler* and *Spectator*, the *Monthly Magazine* of London and *The Scots Magazine*, as miscellaneous periodicals emanating from distinct regions; and the *The Monthly Review* and *The Edinburgh Review*, as important examples of the new review genres, which provided an index to current publications.⁵⁰ Table 7.1 shows the proportion of Scottish and English associations which acquired each work.⁵¹

7.1 Selected Periodicals in Associations

	English Associations	Percentage	Scottish Associations	Percentage	Percentage of English and Scottish Associations
Edinburgh Review (1802-1929)	7 of 12	58	5 of 6	83	67
Monthly Review (1749-1845)	14 of 22	64	6 of 8	75	67
Monthly Magazine (1796-1843)	9 of 15	60	1 of 6	17	48
Scots Magazine (1739-1826)	0 of 0	0	5 of 8	63	17
Spectator (1711-12)	7 of 22	32	3 of 8	38	30
Tatler (1709-11)	8 of 22	36	1 of 8	13	30

⁴⁹ *Macclesfield* (1779); *Peterborough* (1783); *Leeds* (1785); *Halifax* (1786); *Stamford* (1787); *Duns* (1789); DCRO, D/X/1355/1 Westgate Library; *Kelso* (1790); *Cornwall* (1792); *Manchester* (1794); *York Book Society* (1797); *Bristol* (1798); CAC, WPR/59/1A Kendal Book Club Rules; *Ayr* (1802); *Exeter* (1808); *Glasgow* (1810); *Tavistock* (1810); *Kilmarnock* (1811); *Newton* (1814); BA, FZ/5/1/1-60 Caledonian Book Club Receipts; BOD, G. Pamph. 540 (1) *A catalogue of the books of the Bampton Reading Society* (1815); *Lincoln* (1815); *Durham* (1817); *Salisbury* (1820); *Fort William* (1819); *Haworth* (1820); *Ludlow* (1823); *Kirkcudbright* (1824); *Evesham* (1825); *Doncaster* (1829).

⁵⁰ St Clair, *Nation*, 572-573 estimates that *The Spectator's* original circulation was 3,000 copies. The *Monthly Review* and the *Monthly Magazine* were the highest-circulating literary journals in 1797 which St Clair lists, at 5,000 per month. He does not give statistics for the *Scots Magazine*. He says that the *Edinburgh Review* sold 13,000 copies in 1814, and classes it amongst the main romantic period literary reviews.

⁵¹ These calculations exclude catalogues which pre-date the publication in question, in order to give a more accurate reflection as to the proportion of contemporary associations that acquired a given publication at the same time.

Both the *Tatler* and *Spectator* were issued at least sixty years before any of these catalogues were published. This data shows that English associations were more likely to acquire old copies of the *Tatler*, whereas Scots preferred outdated *Spectators*. The impact often ascribed to these publications in the creation of 'politeness' throughout the long eighteenth century is clearly a derivative one, rather than through the ubiquity of these texts in institutions throughout the century.⁵² *The Scots Magazine*, which united 63% of the Scottish associations, was not found in any English associations, and the *Monthly Magazine* was available in over half of all English associations, but only one in Scotland. Clearly, the readership of these miscellaneous periodicals was confined to Scottish and English communities respectively. However, some publications achieved high proportions of circulation in both English and Scottish associations. Both *The Monthly Review* and *The Edinburgh Review* were found in at least half of all associations, whether English or Scottish. This shows that review literature was beginning to unite English and Scottish readers, who acquired works of literary criticism emanating from both metropolises of the United Kingdom. Whilst the news and miscellaneous material of magazines appealed to separate constituencies, the high culture of review publications (whether by English or Scottish publishers) united Anglo-Scottish associations in a shared pursuit of intellectual culture.

Beyond the review journals, were English and Scottish associations acquiring the same books, as part of a contemporaneous, if not simultaneous, print community? Furthermore, were the most widely-shared works actually Scottish? Scotland's important contribution to British literary culture has been acknowledged: David Allan suggests that 'Scotland was central rather than peripheral to provincial literary culture'.⁵³ Allan argues that English people were well acquainted with Scottish texts, which 'allowed notions of common Britishness to flourish', although whether they regarded the nationality of these authors as Scottish other or British self is unclear.⁵⁴ By the early nineteenth century, Sir Walter Scott is said to have 'saturated the British fiction market', and after 1815 Scotland is said to have had

⁵² A. Benchimol, *Intellectual Politics and Cultural Conflict in the Romantic Period: Scottish Whigs, English Radicals and the making of the British public sphere* (Farnham, 2010), 46; D. Allan, *Scotland in the Eighteenth Century: Union and Enlightenment* (London, 2002), 130-131.

⁵³ D. Allan, 'The Scottish Enlightenment and the Readers of Late Georgian Lancaster: "Light in the North"', *Northern History*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Sept., 2000), 280.

⁵⁴ Allan, *Making British Culture*, 238.

a 'disproportionate importance' in British culture.⁵⁵ However, in this teleological narrative of the rise of Scottish literature, there have been few studies which attempt to quantify the significance or ubiquity of Scottish writings within the British literary canon over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Allan notes that Scott's poems were a 'virtually compulsory core' of associational collections, and in one unique study, he calculates that 22% of the Lancaster Amicable Society's books in 1785 were Scottish.⁵⁶ He suggests that this 'special interest' in Scottish literature was probably not 'untypical' of English associations; this chapter aims to clarify whether English associations were particularly beholden to Scottish writers, and what this tells us about the broader geographies of culture in this period.⁵⁷

Table 7.2 displays the popularity of texts within the same sample of thirty English and Scottish associations, comparatively and then unified into overall frequency of occurrence. The texts have been selected as they are the authors oft-cited within literary studies as key influences on Scottish or British identity, and seen as 'popular' due to their authors' reputation, and/or production statistics.⁵⁸ As a gauge of the uniformity of associational holdings, this table clearly shows that some texts and authors were to be found in English and Scottish associations alike: principally Gibbon, Hume, Scott, Johnson, Smith, Blackstone and Shakespeare, if the bar is set at 50% saturation. The text which was most popular in this sample of Anglo-Scottish literary culture was Gibbon's *History*, closely followed by works by Hume, Scott and Johnson: the shared literary culture thus ranged across historical and literary genres. In order to contextualise the smaller sample of Scottish associations examined here, the results can be compared to Towsey's analysis of 44 Scottish subscription library catalogues. He found Hume's *History* in 95% of them; Smith's *Wealth of Nations* in

⁵⁵ I. Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton, 2007), xi; R. Cronin, *Paper Pellets: British Literary Culture after Waterloo* (Oxford, 2010), 11.

⁵⁶ Allan, *Nation*, 104; Allan, 'The Scottish Enlightenment', 277.

⁵⁷ Allan, 'The Scottish Enlightenment', 277, 280.

⁵⁸ Davis, *Acts of Union* includes Fielding, Smollett, Macpherson, Johnson, Burns, Wordsworth and Scott. A. Broadie, 'Introduction', in A. Broadie (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 2003), 2 cites Hume and Smith as 'leading protagonists of the Scottish Enlightenment'. St Clair, *Nation*, 652 shows Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* went into fifteen editions before 1820; this is compared against Gibbon's *Decline*, of which St Clair, *Nation*, 598-599 estimates over 35,000 copies were printed before 1815. St Clair, *Nation*, 99 shows that Blackstone's *Commentaries* were certainly perceived as valuable, for he sold the copyright to them for over £3000. St Clair, *Nation*, 148-149 shows that Shakespeare was 'one of the authors most quoted from in the printed anthologies of the romantic period', with at least nine different edited collections being produced in the eighteenth century.

7.2 Selected English and Scottish Works in Associations

	English Associations	Percentage	Scottish Associations	Percentage	Percentage of English and Scottish Associations
Gibbon, <i>The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire</i> (1776)	14 of 22	64	7 of 8	88	70
Hume, <i>History of England</i> (1754)	12 of 22	55	8 of 8	100	67
Works by Scott	10 of 15	67	4 of 6	67	67
Johnson, <i>Lives of English Poets</i> (1781)	13 of 21	62	6 of 8	75	66
Smith, <i>Wealth of Nations</i> (1776)	15 of 22	68	7 of 8	88	63
Blackstone, <i>Commentaries on the Laws of England</i> (1768)	11 of 22	50	5 of 8	63	53
Works by Shakespeare	10 of 22	45	6 of 8	75	53
Macpherson, <i>Ossian</i> (1761-5)	6 of 22	27	7 of 8	88	43
Burns, <i>Poems in Scottish Dialect</i> (1783)	7 of 21	33	4 of 8	50	38
Wordsworth, <i>Lyrical Ballads</i> (1798)	2 of 14	14	0 of 6	0	10

Works by Scottish authors are emboldened.

75%; *Ossian* in 66%; Burns' *Poems* in 68%; and Scott's novels in 52%.⁵⁹ Comparing Towsey's results directly to the English associations here, Hume, Macpherson and Burns were clearly much less ubiquitous outside of their homeland, while Smith and Scott were venerated on both sides of the border, attesting to a shared literary culture at this level. Towsey does not examine the incidence of any English-authored works in Scottish catalogues, but this chapter's research suggests that Scottish associations were interested in English authors such as Gibbon and Shakespeare. Literature did not function as a tool of

⁵⁹ M. R. M. Towsey, "All Partners may be Enlightened and Improved by Reading Them": the Distribution of Enlightenment Books in Scottish Subscription Library Catalogues, 1750-c.1820', *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2008), 30-32.

English internal colonialism, but rather enabled the growing importance of Scots within British culture. As well as sharing associational practices, English and Scottish reading association members were deeply invested in a shared literary canon, partially formed through the widespread use of review journals. The evolution of a reading society in Bolton from being known as the 'Scotch Book Club' to the 'Caledonian Book Club' and thence to the 'Union Book Club' between 1809 and 1820 is suggestive of the shift from a focus on separate Scottish literature to an acknowledgement of this literature's integration within a British canon.⁶⁰

However, this was hardly a community of simultaneous readers. As an example, the Barnard Castle Book Club, founded in 1819 in County Durham, was a small community of fourteen members.⁶¹ Circulation lists from 1830-33 show that not all the members read (or more precisely, had possession of) each book that the society purchased.⁶² In fact, the average number of people to whom a book was circulated was only seven, thus failing to unite even this small club in a universal reading experience. At the Selkirk Subscription Library at the turn of the century, the sampled borrowings of five members contain 192 titles, of which only 60 entries are duplicates.⁶³ This means that the 132 other titles were only borrowed by one of these readers: the community did not read texts contemporaneously. Indeed, three examples of novels show the discrepancy between members' reading experiences. Clarkson read *Betsy Thoughtless* in 1799, which Lawson did not read until 1802. Scott read the *Mysteries of Udolpho* in 1801, but Park did not read it until 1803. Park read *Belinda* in 1802, which Pringle did not read until 1805. If the meaning of a text is formed as part of its reader's mental horizon and temporal context, then the interpretative experience of individual Selkirk members was surely fragmented by reading the same text, years apart. Even periodicals, an eponymously temporal form of literature, were not always read in a prompt and regular way: Ridpath often read his library's periodicals many months after they were published, thus becoming detached from the implied periodicity of their

⁶⁰ BA, FZ/5/1/15 and /19, Caledonian Book Club Receipts; BA, FZ/17/1 Union Book Club Minutes, 27.

⁶¹ DCRO, D/HH/10/2/1 Barnard Castle Book Club Records.

⁶² DCRO, D/HH/10/2/2 Barnard Castle Book Club Circulation Book.

⁶³ SBA, S/PL/7/1 Selkirk Subscription Library. The five borrowers were: Reverend George Lawson, the most prolific borrower; James Scott, schoolmaster at Yarrow; Alexander Pringle, esquire; Alexander Park, a writer; and Ebenezer Clarkson, surgeon. The samples do not begin or end at a uniform date, which is inconsistently noted, but all contain at least 20 recognised titles, and include the year 1802.

broader readership.⁶⁴ The borrowing records of the Wye Book Club show that in 1775, one member borrowed the *Gentleman's Magazine* for September, followed by the *Gentleman's Magazine* for October, before returning to the *Gentleman's Magazine* for August.⁶⁵ Aside from these temporal slippages, the age of books within associational collections, as examined in chapter one, indicates that reading associations did not always furnish readers with books which were topical and national, failing to fit with Anderson's newspaper-reading paradigm.

Associations formed a self-aware and temporally-united community through their rhythms of gathering together, rather than through the simultaneity of their reading practice. John Urie recalled a Scottish book club which discussed 'current topics' at their monthly meeting.⁶⁶ Thomas Asline Ward was at a meeting of his Sheffield Book Club when news of a military victory came in 1814; the group then planned to have a celebratory meal together the next day.⁶⁷ The Birmingham Book Club dinner invitation for 1802 made reference to the peace treaty of Amiens being 'nearly done', and proposed a toast at the dinner to 'good fellowship all the world o'er'.⁶⁸ Associations, while being predicated on a shared interest in print culture, were actually united by their regular gatherings, which effectively and tangibly created ties between members of the reading public in a locality, and connected them to the broader national stage by their discussion of news and politics. Furthermore, participation in a book club opened up imagined ties with others in similar situations. The gift and exchange of books could physically sustain or represent friendships, and discussion of reading formed a popular topic of epistolary conversation.⁶⁹ This trope can be further extended by considering the way that people included news of book-club orders and happenings in their

⁶⁴ e.g. he read the 1755 April Review in July; the 1755 May and June Scots Magazines in August; the 1756 January review in April; the Philosophical Transactions for 1754 in May 1756; and the October and November Reviews for 1759 in January 1760. *Ridpath*, 16, 24, 63, 71, 297.

⁶⁵ LPL, MS 1699 Wye Book Club Papers. Accounts 1764-1784, 47.

⁶⁶ J. Urie, *Reminiscences of Eighty Years* (Paisley, 1908), 27.

⁶⁷ *Peeps into the Past being Passages from the Diary of Thomas Asline Ward*, ed. A. B. Bell (Sheffield, 1909), 215.

⁶⁸ LBAS, MS2571/4/1/1 (1802).

⁶⁹ M. R. M. Towsey, "I can't resist sending you the book": Private Libraries, Elite Women, and Shared Reading Practices in Georgian Britain', *Library and Information History*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Sept., 2013), 210-222; M. Ellis, 'Reading Practices in Elizabeth Montagu's Epistolary Network of the 1750s', in E. Eger (ed.), *Bluestockings Displayed: Portraiture, Performance and Patronage, 1730-1830* (Cambridge, 2013), 213-232; S. E. Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660-1800* (Oxford, 2009), 208-212.

letters to friends and relatives.⁷⁰ Reading association members thereby became implicated in the transactions of the literary world in three respects: by their reading practices as part of an anonymous reading public, by their involvement in a tangible reading community, and then by writing of these things to their correspondents in a personal republic of letters. It was by embedding their reading in sociable networks of shared resources and concomitant discussion, that these readers experienced the imagined community of print culture.

IV. The Geography of National Culture

This chapter will now consider whether similar associational practices and shared texts united the readers in these variant localities into a consciously national reading community. Although it has become commonplace for eighteenth-century histories to describe 'the reading nation' or a 'nation of readers', to what extent did reading associations foster nationwide connections and mutual self-identification amongst readers? What were the geographic foci of this national readership, and to what extent did it encompass both metropolis and province, England and Scotland? Did this lead to a contemporary perception of an Anglo-Scottish reading public?

The provinces have traditionally been argued to have been passive recipients of culture, rather than agents in its creation.⁷¹ London is assumed to have provided the 'cultural benchmark' to which provinces aspired, in line with the wider thesis of middle-class

⁷⁰ Barbara Johnson described the Brackley Book Club in BOD, MS. Don. c. 192, folios 52-3, and her brother enquired after the club in BOD, MS. Don. c. 191 folios 41-2; *Selections from the Letters of Caroline Frances Cornwallis* (London, 1864), 5, 35; *Letters of Anna Seward: Written Between the Years 1784 and 1807*, ed. A. Constable, 6 Vols (Edinburgh, 1811), vi. 390; H. L. Piozzi, *The Piozzi Letters: Correspondence of Hester Lynch Piozzi, 1784-1821 (Formerly Mrs. Thrale)*, ed. E. A. Bloom and L. Bloom, 6 Vols (Newark, DE, 1996), iv. 157-159, 221-224.

⁷¹ J. Feather, 'The Country Trade in Books', in R. Myers and M. Harris (eds), *Spreading the Word: The Distribution Networks of Print 1550-1850* (Winchester, 1990), 165; B. Harris, 'The Enlightenment, Towns and Urban Society in Scotland, c. 1760-1820', *English Historical Review*, Vol. CXXVI, No. 522 (Oct., 2011), 1118.

emulation.⁷² The cultural attraction of London is thought to have been particularly strong in 'social' centres like York, as opposed to commercial centres focussed on the creation of new wealth, such as Birmingham.⁷³ However, others have argued for a more complex relationship between metropolis and province: Peter Borsay speaks of provincial 'adaptation and transformation' of London fashions.⁷⁴ Harris and McKean, discussing urban renewal through the period, remind their readers that Scots could look to a variety of places, including but not limited to London, for models.⁷⁵ Ian Jackson suggests that provincial printers acted as 'bridges' between metropolitan realms of production and their local area, and used their newspapers to compile 'truthful' digests of metropolitan news for their local community.⁷⁶ Elizabeth Child suggests that provincial literary culture operated differently to metropolitan culture, providing more opportunities for female authors, and encouraging greater social interaction than in hierarchical London.⁷⁷ No model of cultural diffusion can perfectly encapsulate all the dynamics of cultural exchange in this period, but a simple interpretation of metropolitan dominance is clearly flawed. In terms of associations, Clark suggested that clubs and societies drew their inspiration from the capital, but over the century they became 'polycentric' and subject to 'regional bunching'.⁷⁸ This chapter's research on associational emulation will further debunk the idea of the cultural hegemony of London's 'polite' paradigms. This section will investigate the diffusion of associational culture by considering trade connections; patterns of emulation and associational models; the most widely disseminated associational publications; and the interconnection of associations.

One tangible reminder of the associations' geographical relationship to print culture was the trade framework by which they acquired books. Provincial societies often ordered

⁷² P. Borsay, 'The London Connection: Cultural Diffusion and the Eighteenth-Century Provincial Town', *The London Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (May, 1994), 24; For criticism of the emulation thesis, see M. R. Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680-1780* (London, 1996).

⁷³ J. J. Looney, 'Cultural Life in the Provinces: Leeds and York, 1720-1820', in A. L. Beier, D. Cannadine and J. M. Rosenheim (eds), *The First Modern Society: Essays in English History in Honour of Lawrence Stone* (Cambridge, 1989), 483-510.

⁷⁴ Borsay, 'London Connection', 31.

⁷⁵ Harris and McKean, *The Scottish Town*, 82.

⁷⁶ I. Jackson, 'Print in Provincial England: Reading and Northampton, 1720-1800', Unpublished DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford, 2003, 128, 179.

⁷⁷ E. Child, "'To Sing the Town": Women, Place, and Print Culture in Eighteenth-Century Bath', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, Vol. 28 (1999), 155-172.

⁷⁸ Clark, *Clubs*, 84-85, 455.

directly from London booksellers, thus incurring charges for the carriage of books.⁷⁹ Scottish associations, such as the Wigtown Subscription Library, turned to London when they could not find desired works in Edinburgh.⁸⁰ However, local options often proved better than metropolitan ones: when the Ayr Library found their Glaswegian bookseller was no longer trading, they instead turned to 'J. and P. Booksellers here', i.e. Ayr.⁸¹ The Kilmarnock Library similarly turned to their local bookseller after considering Glasgow, Edinburgh and London sellers, deciding that 'the Society will be more conveniently and as cheaply served' by using a local seller.⁸² Ridpath compared the Kelso Library's disbursements to Kincaid and Donaldson with prices cited by the *London Magazine*, and was pleased to discover that he was receiving a good deal.⁸³ This ability to choose between distant and near booksellers actually gave associations a financial advantage: the Greenock Library requested sealed offers of booksellers' prices.⁸⁴ Another option was Ireland: the Ayr Library Society planned to purchase Voltaire's works 'either from Dublin or London', and specifically ordered an Irish copy of Campbell's *Survey of Great Britain*.⁸⁵ Associations were neither beholden to metropolitan providers, nor dependent on their local sellers (although this was often how they secured the best terms), and instead chose from a range of businesses and locations.⁸⁶

Historians have noticed similarities between associations, which Allan described as 'shameless mimicry' and 'unembarrassed imitation of cultural precedent'.⁸⁷ He uses these practices of emulation to strengthen his argument that associational readers were self-consciously aspiring to polite status, and thus they were eager to follow existing, legitimate patterns. Societies' emulation of others' rulebooks and practices certainly indicates the common purposes and unified methods of associations across the country. However, patterns of emulation also illuminate how ideas of literary associationalism were disseminated, and the models which associations looked to: namely, provincial, regional

⁷⁹ WLA, WA1/1/2/1 Greenock Foreign Library Minute Book 1807-1828 includes accounts for the carriage of books from Edinburgh and London; DA, Z19/41/1 Exeter Library Society Minutes 1777-1789, 132; Crosse, *Account*, Rules, 4.

⁸⁰ HL, MS 5/27 Wigtown Subscription Library, 15.

⁸¹ ACL, 027.441 Air Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776-1830, 97.

⁸² BMC, AA/DC/180/1 Kilmarnock Public Library Minutes 1797-1823, 28.

⁸³ *Ridpath*, 39.

⁸⁴ WLA, WA1/1/1/2 Greenock Library Minute Book 1816-1831, 51.

⁸⁵ ACL, 027.441 Air Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1776-1830, 76, 1.

⁸⁶ This complements Feather's analysis of the development of the provincial book trade from the perspective of the sellers: see J. Feather, *The Provincial Book Trade in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1985).

⁸⁷ Allan, *Making British Culture*, 70.

institutions. The printed proposal for establishing the Halifax Circulating Library noted the foundation of similar institutions in neighbouring Lancashire, and a newspaper advert announcing the establishment of the Hereford Reading Society named similar institutions in Birmingham and Worcester as ‘incentive[s]’.⁸⁸ John Marsh and his co-founders of the Chichester Book Society sought inspiration from the printed rules of associations in Portsmouth, Canterbury, and Sandwich.⁸⁹ A subscription library in Aberdeen offered to share their plan and regulations with those who sought to establish similar associations in ‘Inverness, Banff, Peterhead or other places’.⁹⁰ In rural areas, book clubs could affect other readers in close proximity: Jane Austen gloated that her book club had inspired the Miss Sibleys to establish their own, whereas ‘no emulation of the kind was ever inspired’ by the Steventon Book Society.⁹¹ Emulation could also turn to more competitive attempts to keep up with others, which again focused on local examples rather than metropolitan models. The *True Briton* reported that the Hull Subscription Library discontinued the *Analytical Review* due to its ‘immoral tendency’, a resolution which was swiftly adopted by literary societies in Leeds.⁹² Similarly, after the Sheffield Library received volumes of the public records, it was reported that the York Library thought ‘a copy of these Records would be desirable for our own Library’.⁹³ These instances of emulation indicate that associations looked to regional models rather than metropolitan examples, and measured their progress against other institutions within their local network.

Another point of exchange between reading associations was their acquisition of others’ published transactions, as shown in table 7.3. The same sample of thirty associational catalogues were examined for references to the works of other institutions, indicating their influential models and sources of information.⁹⁴ Catalogues often indicated regional affiliations, such as the Tavistock Public Subscription Library’s acquisition of the *Transactions of the Geological Society of Cornwall*, the *Transactions of the Plymouth*

⁸⁸ WYAS, MISC:5/96C/79 Proposals for Establishing a Circulating Library in Halifax, 1; *Hereford Journal*, Dec. 7, 1814, Issue 2229.

⁸⁹ *The John Marsh Journals: The Life and Times of a Gentleman Composer (1752-1828)*, ed. B. Robins (Stuyvesant, 1998), 450.

⁹⁰ *The Monthly Magazine; Or, British Register*, Vol. XXI Part I for 1806 (London, 1806), 293.

⁹¹ *Jane Austen’s Letters*, ed. D. Le Faye, Third edn (Oxford, 1997), 199.

⁹² *True Briton*, Oct. 18, 1798, Issue 1816.

⁹³ *The Yorkshire Gazette*, Mar. 20, 1824, Issue 257.

⁹⁴ See page 65. I employ the same method of only including catalogues which post-date each publication.

Institution, and the Plymouth Library's catalogues.⁹⁵ The Manchester Circulating Library held reports of the Humane Society of London, as well as the more local Lancashire Humane Society.⁹⁶ Across the sample, the most ubiquitous associational publication was the *Memoirs of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society*, the distribution of which exceeded that of the *Transactions* of the Royal Society of London, thus displacing this high-metropolitan institution as the primary associational model. The *Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh* were acquired by half of the Scottish associations in this sample, but only two English associations, showing a Scottish specificity to their readership. The transactions of metropolitan institutions divided Scottish and English readers, but provincial associations such as the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society provided an equitable, accessible model for both Scottish and English associations.

7.3 Institutional Transactions in Associations

	English Associations	Percentage	Scottish Associations	Percentage	Percentage of English and Scottish Associations
Memoirs of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society (1783-)	7 of 21	33	3 of 8	38	34
Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London (1666-)	8 of 22	36	2 of 8	25	33
Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (1788-)	2 of 17	12	4 of 8	50	24
Bath Society for the Encouragement of Agriculture, Arts and Manufactures (1780-)	4 of 21	19	2 of 8	25	21

As well as being independent, competitive institutions, reading associations also interacted in ways which promoted a sense of interconnection, and commonality. In acknowledgement of their shared commitment to knowledge, associations sometimes granted access to members of other institutions. The Tavistock Subscription Library noted that it was 'open to members of the Exeter and Plymouth Institutions; the Plymouth,

⁹⁵ *Tavistock* (1839), 43, 50.

⁹⁶ *Manchester* (1794), 54.

Penzance and Truro Public Libraries, and the Geological Society at Penzance'.⁹⁷ Beyond the reciprocal access of these regional institutions, the Greenock Library agreed to admit 'Subscribers to the Newcastle Library and other similar institutions', on production of a certificate of membership.⁹⁸

Alongside the exchange of associations' printed rules and practices, the circulation of members could cross-fertilise ideas between reading associations, and bring them to a greater consciousness of their mutuality. Dr Carpenter of the Bristol Library had originally been a librarian at the Liverpool Athenaeum, giving him experience with which he advised his new community.⁹⁹ A regular attendee of the Exeter Library, Samuel Curwen, was an American who had originally been involved with the Philosophical Library of Salem, pointing towards a transatlantic literary network.¹⁰⁰ The Hackney Literary Institution's catalogue indicates that they were in possession of some surprising publications from remote institutions, donated by leading member John Clennell: the regulations of the Arbroath Subscription Library; the catalogue and regulations of the North Shields Subscription Library; and an unidentified publication of the Newcastle Upon Tyne Literary and Philosophical Society.¹⁰¹ The Hackney Institution listened to a paper 'on the advantages of mutual intercourse amongst literary institutions',¹⁰² and its author, the same John Clennell, had previously been involved with the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society.¹⁰³ Evidently, Clennell drew together this eclectic range of institutional templates into the holdings of the Hackney Institution. In the realms of architecture and performance, it has been postulated that 'cultural carriers' moved from London to the provinces, thus disseminating London fashions.¹⁰⁴ Conversely, in these examples of reading associations, the 'cultural carriers' travelled between provincial associations, or even moved from province to metropolis. This process of exchange indicates that associations were providing comparable services and

⁹⁷ *Tavistock* (1839), 67

⁹⁸ WLA, WA1/1/1/1 Greenock Library Minute Book 1794-1815, 43.

⁹⁹ *The Bristol Mercury*, May 13, 1828, Issue 1987.

¹⁰⁰ *The Journal of Samuel Curwen, Loyalist*, ed. A. Oliver, 2 Vols (Cambridge, MA, 1972).

¹⁰¹ *A Catalogue of the Books in the Library of the Hackney Literary Institution* (Hackney, 1816), 4-6.

¹⁰² *Regulations of the Hackney Literary Institution and Subscription Library* (London, 1806), 10

¹⁰³ J. Mee and J. Wilkes, 'Transpennine Enlightenment: The Literary and Philosophical Societies and Knowledge Networks in the North, 1781-1830', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Dec., 2015), 608.

¹⁰⁴ Borsay, 'London Connection', 25-26.

experiences to similar middling-sort readers across the country, forming a common culture which allowed individuals to easily integrate into new associations.

V. Conclusion: Beyond the Nation?

An important foundation for the shared literary culture of England and Scotland was their joint use of the English language. The Scots had increasingly been using English through the seventeenth century, and even began to lecture in English in the early eighteenth century.¹⁰⁵ Conversely, the Welsh retained their own language, with three-quarters of the population still primarily using Welsh in the 1880s; as such, their literary culture was distinct.¹⁰⁶ The primacy of English-language works within eighteenth-century British literary culture and reading preferences is attested to by associational prohibition of foreign texts.¹⁰⁷ This leads to the question of whether this was not simply a 'British' literary culture, but rather an Anglophone union, encompassing the British Atlantic as well as the empire. Indeed, the first subscription library was established in Philadelphia in 1731, with 51 of these so-called 'social libraries' being established in North America between 1733 and 1780.¹⁰⁸ American historians place American institutions in a 'network' which also included English and Scottish libraries.¹⁰⁹ The Boston Athenaeum took its inspiration from the Liverpool Athenaeum, attesting to the overlap of associational structures.¹¹⁰ The most requested books at the Redwood Library in 1761 were Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion* and Campbell's *Lives of*

¹⁰⁵ M. Moonie, 'Print Culture and the Scottish Enlightenment, 1748-86', Unpublished DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford, 1999, 29, 54.

¹⁰⁶ Colley, *Britons*, 13.

¹⁰⁷ WYAS, MISC:5/96C/79 Proposals for Establishing a Circulating Library in Halifax, 1; *Dursley* (1818), 1; *Ludlow* (1823), 1; BODJJ, Circulating Libraries Box 5 (78), 1. They were to 'chiefly' be English works in Liverpool (1760), 4. Others set limits on the amount of foreign works to be included: the Hull Subscription Library capped expenditure on foreign books at two pounds per annum in 1780, Crosse, *Account*, 6.

¹⁰⁸ R. W. Beales and J. N. Green, 'Libraries and their Users', in H. Amory and D. D. Hall (eds), *A History of the Book in America, Volume 1: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill, 2007), 400-402.

¹⁰⁹ R. Wendorf (ed.), *America's Membership Libraries* (New Castle, DE, 2007), 12.

¹¹⁰ R. Wendorf, 'The Boston Athenaeum est. 1807', in Wendorf, *Membership Libraries*, 87.

the Admirals, showing American associational readers were interested not only in English-language texts, but in the history and affairs of Britain.¹¹¹ The 'middling sort' members of the Library Company of Philadelphia emulated the Pennsylvanian gentry, but also sought to 'join the intellectual world of Great Britain' by their book choices.¹¹² To what extent did English and Scottish reading associations encompass America or the wider community of English-speakers in their conception of the 'reading nation' and wider public?

Of this sample of thirty Scottish and English associational catalogues, three held the *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* held at Philadelphia.¹¹³ Benjamin Franklin appeared in the list of key authors in poems about the Lewes Library Society and the Dalkeith Library, but was the only American to do so.¹¹⁴ In fact, the greatest category of foreign authors mentioned in these poems was French: Rollin and Voltaire featured on both lists, supplemented by Fontenelle, Marmontel, Necker and Volney in Forbes' poem.¹¹⁵ This shows that British reading associations drew on wider currents of thought (although usually in translation, as the associational legislation indicates). It also contextualises the significance of Scottish writers within the associations' conception of the canon. They were the most significant sub-group of non-English writers; and vice versa. This was a 'British' culture, with a backdrop of wider European and transatlantic enlightenment thought.

Finally, it is important to establish contemporary perspectives on the power of literature to transcend place or unite people. Books were viewed as not only doors to increased knowledge, but also to communion with other places and times. This fostered a sense of transnational community and mutual recognition with other readers, which was magnified by the club context, as clubs were themselves 'circuits of conversation'.¹¹⁶ The preface of the Kilmarnock Library's catalogue exulted that 'through the medium of books, we can, without danger or fatigue travel over the whole habitable globe'; a particularly pertinent reference, given that several of the library's members had experienced the journey to

¹¹¹ C. Helms, 'The Redwood Library and Athenaeum est. 1747', in Wendorf, *Membership Libraries*, 25.

¹¹² G. Boudreau, "'Highly Valuable & Extensively Useful': Community and Readership Among the Eighteenth Century Philadelphia Middling Sort", *Pennsylvania History*, Vol. 63, No. 3 Education (Summer, 1996), 312.

¹¹³ *Leeds* (1785), *Manchester* (1794), *Bristol* (1798).

¹¹⁴ J. Button, *The Lewes Library Society; a Poem* (London, 1804); P. Forbes, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Edinburgh, 1812), 9-17.

¹¹⁵ Forbes, *Poems*; Button, *Lewes*.

¹¹⁶ R. Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London, 2000), 37.

outposts of trade and empire.¹¹⁷ Forbes' poem on 'The Library' similarly noted that 'to gang to Egypt's but a trip, without a shalty, chaise or ship'.¹¹⁸ A poem was composed by Mr Blyth to be recited at the Eclectic Book Society's anniversary meeting, and marvelled: 'who has not travell'd sitting safe at home, O'er the wide steppes, where vagrant Tartars roam'.¹¹⁹ This travel was also a form of diversion: Sir John Herschel advocated that reading books 'transports him into a livelier and gayer, and more diversified and interesting scene'.¹²⁰ The associations' conception of reading as stationary travel reinforces Anderson's theory about the importance of eighteenth-century literature, particularly the novel, in generating a sense of synchronised time, through which different protagonists could exist in separate locations in the same moment. Associational members' articulation of books' ability to bridge distances shows that a conception of a united 'reading public' is not an anachronism, but was plausible in their own mental frameworks. In contrast, a lack of literature was seen to isolate people, conceptually distancing them from civilisation. Wordsworth wrote to a friend that 'I might as well live at St. Kilda for any commerce I have with passing literature... we have no Book-Club'.¹²¹ Likewise, Hester Lynch Piozzi wrote that she was 'shut up here' with 'no hope of a new book - except from the Reading Society at Denbigh'.¹²² To be connected to a reading association, particularly for those who had no other forms of access to literature, was to be in contact with many other (imagined) readers.

Furthermore, the 'travel' afforded by literature was not only through space. The Kilmarnock Library boasted that 'we can transport ourselves to former times; listen to the harrangues [sic] of Demosthenes and Cicero, and converse with Socrates'.¹²³ Herschel argued that books placed readers 'in contact with the best society in every period of history', with whom they were 'associating in thought'.¹²⁴ Reading not only united contemporary readers, but made a transhistorical connection between great thinkers and their modern readers. The universalising influence of reading is shown in Crichton's poem, dedicated to

¹¹⁷ *Kilmarnock* (1811), 1.

¹¹⁸ Forbes, *Poems*, 16.

¹¹⁹ LMA, CLC/064/MS00988A The Eclectic Book Society Minute Book 1812-1820, 108.

¹²⁰ J. Herschel, *An Address to the Subscribers to the Windsor and Eton Public Library and Reading-Room* (London, 1833), 19.

¹²¹ *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Volume II*, ed. E. D. Selincourt, and rev. by M. Moorman (Oxford, 1969), 176.

¹²² H. L. Piozzi, *The Piozzi Letters: Correspondence of Hester Lynch Piozzi, 1784-1821 (Formerly Mrs. Thrale)*, ed. E. A. Bloom and L. Bloom, 6 Vols (Newark, DE, 1996), iv. 158-159.

¹²³ *Kilmarnock* (1811), 1.

¹²⁴ Herschel, *Address*, 24.

the Paisley Library Society, whom he greets as 'friends of Science! friends of human kind!' and later 'friends of Man'.¹²⁵ In a poem written for the Lynn Regis Book Society, knowledge is said to 'join mankind in Friendship's bond' and 'waft from pole to pole'.¹²⁶ It exists 'in distant ages... in distant climes'.¹²⁷ Associational readers formed a self-conscious, visible community which shared knowledge and reading experiences; books enabled contemporaries to transcend their location, and feel themselves to be part of a wider reading community who were intimately connected to their learned forebears. This renders the simultaneity of the reading experience unimportant, as books created a timeless readership. English and Scottish associations were the closest outposts of this worldwide and transhistorical union, and their similar practices, texts and language further strengthened this conceptual connection.

The beliefs, practices and rhetoric of associations have been shown to have been the same in England and Scotland. Does this shared practice therefore attest to 'British' principles held in common by associational readers? The animating principles behind associationalism are often described as Addisonian conceptions of politeness.¹²⁸ The relationship of politeness to understandings of national identity is unclear: Allan suggests that politeness 'resonated profoundly in the vocabulary of British contemporaries', but later suggests that Scotland's polite institutions developed in 'mimicry of modish English culture'.¹²⁹ Robert Crawford suggests that Scotland's improving clubs were part of the movement to reduce Scotticisms and aspire to more civilised language, which is said to have concerned both Hume and Boswell.¹³⁰ Likewise, Clark suggests that the Scots were more invested in the pursuit of improvement, due to their less advanced social state.¹³¹ The Easy Club of Edinburgh, established in 1712 by Allan Ramsay, famously wrote to Addison to acknowledge *The Spectator's* influence on their formation.¹³² The members also gave themselves English sobriquets; but later changed these to Scottish ones, suggesting a

¹²⁵ T. Crichton, 'The Library', in T. Leonard (ed.), *Radical Renfrew: Poetry from the French Revolution to the First World War* (Edinburgh, 1990), 53.

¹²⁶ G. Goodwin, *Rising Castle, with other Poems* (Lynn, 1798), 148, 151.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹²⁸ Allan, *Scotland*, 130-131.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 130, 131.

¹³⁰ Crawford, *Devolving*, 24.

¹³¹ Clark, *Clubs*, 85.

¹³² Allan, *Scotland*, 131; J. G. Basker, 'Scotticisms and the problems of Cultural Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain', in J. Dwyer and R. B. Sher (eds), *Eighteenth Century Life: Sociability and Society in Eighteenth-Century Scotland*, Vol. 15, Nos 1 and 2 (Feb. and May, 1991), 86.

vacillating relationship to English politeness.¹³³ This sense of 'cultural ambivalence' about Scottish-British identity leads many to conclude that a 'dual allegiance' to both nations developed, which this study has reiterated by demonstrating associations' dual identities in relation to local and national communities.¹³⁴ Forbes' poem on the Dalkeith Library encapsulated this conflicted attitude towards English manners: he argued in palpable vernacular and with an air of satire that 'Chesterfield will learn you breedin', as straught's a line'.¹³⁵ This chapter has shown that associational practices and texts were not clearly defined as 'English', 'Scottish' or 'British'. They were able to negotiate, adapt and juxtapose ideas of place and affiliation, within a hierarchy of 'publics' to which they belonged.

Indeed, the currency of enlightenment works and ideas in these reading communities and beyond suggests that the distinct 'national' impact of indigenous authors must be questioned. Whilst Scottish and English authors and intellectuals may have operated in 'distinct national traditions',¹³⁶ including their social ties and patronage infrastructures, their works were read in similar English and Scottish associational communities, and their hinterland of individual homes. A focus on the associations of the Scottish literati such as the Select Society, the Easy Club and the Poker Club, construed as an alternative public sphere for Edinburgh elites who had no parliamentary venues in which to debate,¹³⁷ obscures the shared experience of the readers in the more everyday reading associations across Britain.

A comparison of English and Scottish schools of thought is revealing of the way that clubs and associations were seen as manifestations of enlightenment thought. Roy Porter argues that the English Enlightenment was about the pursuit of happiness and self-improvement, available through burgeoning commercial culture. Clubs were one of the key venues for sociability, which he describes as the 'key felific technology pioneered by the English Enlightenment'.¹³⁸ The Scottish Enlightenment was defined by its focus on the

¹³³ D. D. McElroy, 'The Literary Clubs and Societies of Eighteenth Century Scotland, and their Influence on the Literary Productions of the Period from 1700 to 1800', Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1951, 42.

¹³⁴ Basker, 'Scotticisms', 81; Smyth, *Making*, 136; T. M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation, 1700-2000* (London, 1999), 30; J. Clive and B. Bailyn, 'England's Cultural Provinces: Scotland and America', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Scotland and America (Apr., 1954), 213.

¹³⁵ Forbes, *Poems*, 11.

¹³⁶ R. B. Sher, *The Enlightenment & the Book: Scottish Authors and their Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Ireland and America* (London, 2006), 21.

¹³⁷ Allan, *Scotland*, 129; N. Phillipson, 'The Scottish Enlightenment', in R. Porter and M. Teich (eds), *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge, 1981), 32.

¹³⁸ R. Porter, 'The Enlightenment in England', in Porter and Teich, *The Enlightenment*, 15.

'Science of Man', teaching people how to live 'happy, useful and virtuous lives'.¹³⁹ Nicholas Phillipson suggests that the Scots were interested in people as sociable beings because traditional ideas of civic morality had been undermined by the union; instead, Scots invented an alternative language of 'the virtuous citizen as the expert' who helped society towards 'improvement and happiness'.¹⁴⁰ Coffeehouses, clubs and societies were the natural habitat of these new citizens. Thus both 'national' strains of intellectual thought converged on the importance of community as a venue for human improvement, and their populations enacted this at least in part through membership of associations. Associations' inherent sociability, as well as their instigation of wider improvements through practical interventions and symbolic leadership, fitted them for the cause of Enlightenment. Whatever the philosophical origin of associational ideas in their respective localities, Scotland and England shared an associational culture, and reading associations were conscious of the shared literary culture which underpinned them.

Together, chapters six and seven have illustrated the relationship between local and national identity. Dror Wahrman has argued for a cultural split between middling sorts who aspired to metropolitan patterns, or those who invested in a 'communal-provincial' culture.¹⁴¹ He suggests that some merchants and gentry cultivated politeness through associations and other practices, as a tool to escape their own rusticity.¹⁴² Conversely, associations could also support local community self-determination, through philanthropic initiatives and regional networks.¹⁴³ He describes this as a 'cultural dilemma', which evidently has broader parallels in the choice of national and British identities.¹⁴⁴ In the case of associations, this dilemma was not a binary choice between local isolation or national identification. Instead, different levels of identity and identification were woven into associations' choice of rules, models, books, forms of sociability and self-presentation. Belonging to an association certainly facilitated the development of broader identifications with other readers, authors and societies, but it did not necessitate an abandonment of locality in favour of metropolitan conformity. Fragmented identities were not the preserve of the Scottish, or even the

¹³⁹ Phillipson, 'The Scottish Enlightenment', in Porter and Teich, *The Enlightenment*, 20.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 21-32.

¹⁴¹ Wahrman, 'National Society', 43-72.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

American, 'provincial'; the English also layered identities from local, to national, to British, allowing substantial room for Scottish thought and romantic culture. The culture constructed by periodicals, magazines, newspapers and reading associations was not solely an English export, but was able to nurture a variety of literary publics, including a potent new Anglo-Scottish cultural community.

The Enlightenment, as enacted in associations, made reading and sociability into pursuits which were not purely personal; the cultural participation of these readers was buttressed and impelled by the idea that a broader public of other readers, and of their wider locality, were implicated in their actions. Colley argues that the cultural integration facilitated by the proliferation of print was 'not primarily' what enabled an 'emerging sense of Britishness', but then cites almanacs, Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, sermons, newspapers and ephemeral printed propaganda as means by which core features in her definition of Britishness, namely protestantism and war, were shared amongst the public.¹⁴⁵ She concludes by discussing David Wilkie's painting, *Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Gazette of the Battle of Waterloo*, in order to demonstrate that 'it is the experience of recurrent wars that has brought these diverse peoples together'.¹⁴⁶ This chapter contends that the *reading* practices depicted in this painting were a central foundation and precursor of national identity, as print was one of the mechanisms by which literate people, and the middling-sort in particular, came to share ideas, values and prejudices. More important than the content of these shared reading materials was the new awareness of the common attributes and practices shared with other readers. This cultural public was epitomised by reading associations, which provided a face-to-face reading community, defined the citizenship rights of these members, and acted as a conduit to the abstract reading public.

¹⁴⁵ Colley, *Britons*, 17; then 22, 26, 28, 41-42, 330-331.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 366.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined reading associations in England and Scotland from 1760 to 1830, arguing that they played an important part in the development of a broadly-based literary culture in this period. Alongside an account of reading associations as institutions, this thesis has interwoven records of individuals' experience through borrowing and purchasing records, and their diaries. Furthermore, by considering newspapers, literary references and library labels, this research has moved beyond an institutional history to a cultural history of literary associationalism in this period, unpicking the identities and values that they formed.

Chapter one, using the records of associational acquisitions, demonstrated that literary works were as important as knowledge texts in the eyes of contemporary readers. Reading associations provided enlightenment works to middling-sort, provincial readers, showing the wider impact of high-intellectual culture. Indeed, the oft-cited differences between the purchasing and borrowing patterns of book clubs and subscription libraries were shown to be untrue: these forms of association were united in reading a range of genres, pursuing knowledge as well as entertainment.

Chapter two contributed to the history of reading by illuminating practices which were shared amongst communities, rather than individual, exceptional readers. Case studies of borrowing patterns showed the influence that reading association structures had on reading practices, such as the order imposed by their catalogue; but also indicated that individuals chose or were forced to borrow out of order. Intensive reading could be facilitated by these extensive collections, showing that a clear transition from one mode to another is not historically accurate. Associational rules and minute books demonstrated the use of periodicals as a supplementary text, particularly employed by associational committees which sought to legitimise and regulate their community through imposition of moral standards. Chapter three examined the discourse surrounding reading associations, showing their use of learning as a tool of status-construction, and their cultural visibility. Associations' self-representation primarily focused on their knowledge and improving functions, belying

their historiographical association with politeness and sociability. The knowledge which they promoted was broadly-based, uniting middling sorts across occupational divides, although it did not lead to class consciousness. Rather, knowledge and their shared passion for reading was used to define readers' collective gentlemanly status, and the proliferation of these institutions made them the most accessible form of enlightenment intellectualism.

Chapter four investigated how reading communities were constructed, illustrating their dependence on widely-held and replicated principles of equality, the rule of the law, and bureaucratic resolution of conflict. In contrast to historiographical assertions, reading associations did not use legislation to avoid contentious books, but rather relied on the aforementioned social principles to manage conflict. Analysis of poll books indicated that reading association members tended to vote in similar ways, suggesting political similarities amongst their members. In the politically-charged decade of the 1790s, reading associations often sought to demonstrate their loyalism, in contrast to the Habermasian ideal of the apolitical public sphere. Indeed, this chapter argued that associations did not create a 'bourgeois' public sphere, but rather identified their members as citizens of the reading public. Being a member of the reading public was a category of social differentiation, building upon the genteel associations outlined in chapter three.

Chapter five examined the involvement of women and families in reading associations, demonstrating that associations formed neither a homosocial nor a purely 'public' sphere. The household was an important component of associational practice, and women were involved in the reading, management and sociability of associations. As they were predicated on the reading household, associations also frequently encompassed kinship relations, with shares handed down as bequests within families. Associations were an important staging ground for life-cycle displays, showing the maturity of young people, and the conviviality of the elderly: demonstrating knowledge and cultural engagement was thus important and accessible to contemporaries of all ages. The familial and mixed-gender nature of the associations points towards a parochial sphere, in which women wielded greater power than in the abstract, national 'public' sphere. As citizens of the reading association, they were thus legitimate participants in the reading public and national culture.

Chapter six situated reading associations within their local communities, demonstrating the reliance of urban associations on the rural hinterland for one-third of their

members. Nonetheless, towns were portrayed as the hub of associational life, and their local industries or identities were reflected in associations' self-conception. Reading associations' inclusion in town guides and newspapers, as well as their own discourse, demonstrates their contribution to local improvement and the reputation of their town, rendering them an important tool in civic identity construction. Furthermore, their rituals of commemoration contributed to civic memory, and praised citizens for their contributions to Enlightenment and improvement. Again, this local stage of culture was an important forming-ground for individual identities, and the positioning of associational members as moral, intellectual and civic leaders of their locality.

Chapter seven argued that, in tandem with local identity, reading associations were able to connect localised communities of readers to the broader, national reading public. English and Scottish associations were shown to employ the same structures and practices, and were thus a shared mechanism of literary culture which was instrumental in generating common values. The cultural impetus for associations often derived from local examples and rivalries rather than metropolitan emulation. Whilst associations did not create an imagined community through Andersonian rituals of simultaneous reading, they did advocate the idea that books united readers across space and time. Associational practices of sociability reified this imagined community, showing that print and sociability did create a self-conscious public which can be equated to Habermas' and Anderson's models.

There are, of course, some limitations to this study, and areas which could be fruitfully explored in future work. Firstly, the members' associational reading experience might have been only one aspect of their reading lives. Joseph Hunter, a Sheffield apprentice, acquired books through two subscription libraries, a circulating library, bookshops and chapmen.¹ Books were also read communally in the home; given as gifts; and exchanged amongst friends.² Religious or devotional reading was a specialised form, with its own rhythms such as Sunday reading, and seems to have been accounted for and recorded in a different

¹ S. Colclough, 'Procuring Books and Consuming Texts: The Reading Experience of a Sheffield Apprentice, 1798', *Book History*, Vol. 3 (2000), 23.

² N. Tadmor, "'In the even my wife read to me": Women, Reading and Household Life in the Eighteenth Century', in J. Raven, H. Small and N. Tadmor (eds), *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England* (Cambridge, 1996), 168.

fashion.³ Close studies of individual readers could situate reading association participation in the wider landscape of individuals' intellectual activities, and examine the interplay of their different forms of reading. A comparative approach which considered different institutions and venues for reading would also shed light on the relative dynamism of different reading trends in this period: for example, the rapid increase in working-class reading opportunities in comparison to the steady availability for the middling-sorts.

Secondly, reading association membership may well have been part of a diet of cultural activities which included participation in associations devoted to other forms of professional community, scientific endeavour or practical improvement. The social status implications of reading associations outlined in chapter three derived in some ways from the unique significations of book-learning and sociability, but could also have been achieved and supplemented through other forms of associational activity. In contrast to historiographical assertions of the masculine nature of associations in general, this thesis preliminarily indicates that reading associations were unusual in their admission of women: further comparative case studies of other forms of association would illuminate whether the other reading association practices examined here are representative of broader associational trends. This research project was designed to consider the breadth of the reading association movement, aggregating reading association sources from across England and Scotland, and considering their discourse and function on a national level, as a widespread cultural practice. A different social-history research approach, of local case studies, could unpick how reading communities coalesced, in part through other interests and affiliations such as church denominations or trade companies which brought them together, and how this local context conditioned their aims and constructions of sociability.

Instead, this thesis has focused on the significations of reading associations in particular, examining the guidelines which they gave to their readers, their public visibility, and the reasons why so many people chose this form of book provision. In taking this cultural approach it relies to a large degree on the rhetoric and prescriptions of associations. The associations' cultural functions often have to be presumed from their discourse and

³ R. DeMaria, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading* (London, 1997), 71; P. E. Bull, 'The Reading Lives of English Men and Women, 1695-1830', Unpublished PhD Thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London 2012, 241-242; V. Dunstan, 'Reading Habits in Scotland circa 1750-1820', Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2010, 66.

prescriptions, as it is not often possible to evidence these effects using extant ego documents or biographies of their members. Furthermore, within the scope of this research project it is difficult to weigh the significance of reading associations' discourses about learning, improvement and sociability relative to the other cultural currents which disseminated these ideas. This thesis concludes that reading associations were one forum in which contemporaries were exposed to ideas of, and configured as members of, the reading public: but the extent to which this identity was realised *because* of reading association membership is impossible to gauge.

Through its analysis of the practices and values of reading associations, this thesis has also addressed three broader themes: associations' relationship to politeness, to mechanisms of culture, and to the Enlightenment.

I. Politeness

In contrast to Allan and Towsey's interpretations of reading associations as promoting a 'familiar polite prospectus' and constituting 'a primary venue for polite sociability', this thesis has questioned the utility of labelling them as polite institutions.⁴ Associations were not automatically polite, or aiming to be; reading communities did not make this a priority in their discourse, and their politeness was contested and challenged by other writers. Politeness was a social ethic and a behavioural choice, rather than a value inherent in certain institutions or practices. Furthermore, casting reading associations as forms of polite sociability carries connotations of posturing social behaviour, an attention to 'form', which misrepresents associations' more purposive plans of intellectual and general improvement. Their fundamental belief in 'serious' improvements is indicated by their emphasis on the application, if not mechanical utility, of knowledge, which is not consistent with historians'

⁴ D. Allan, *A Nation of Readers: The Lending Library in Georgian England* (London, 2008), 107; M. R. M. Towsey, *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment: Books and Their Readers in Provincial Scotland, 1750-1820* (Leiden, 2010), 90.

usage of 'polite' to described leisured reading. Their aims could thus include various forms of sociability, such as conviviality or entertainment, as well as serious intellectual targets of improvement, education or philanthropy: simply labelling them as polite institutions fails to convey the range of their socio-cultural effects.

If reading association communities are to be considered polite, therefore, this would be on the grounds of their activities and structures, such as their generalist intellectual values, which facilitated community wholeness instead of subdivision by occupational or technical knowledge. Furthermore, they engaged with the moral code implicit in politeness: G. J. Barker-Benfield suggests that the idea of taste was synonymous with morality, and Rosemary Sweet suggests the middling-sort polite code was 'suspicious of extravagance, idleness and irreligion'.⁵ Reading associations' practices and structures embodied a belief in a social and literary morality: the 'propriety' of their cultural engagement was to be ensured by committee and community regulation. They also believed in order, sponsoring linear, regular, and 'proper' reading practices, as well as the bureaucratic implementation of rules within their communities. Politeness, in the reading association at least, was concerned with inner propriety as well as outward behaviour.⁶ Future research could deepen our understanding of polite morality in reading associations by considering the role of religion in generating discourses about reading matter, and as a social force which contributed to the construction of these communities.

Overall, it is clear that politeness was not a label which described a socio-demographic category, but was rather an appellation that could be claimed, negotiated and demonstrated by various types of people.⁷ The variation in the types of people and the places that were implicated in reading associations confirms that polite behaviours were not confined to clearly bounded social ranks or environs. Rather, the analysis of status-creation in chapter three suggested that practices of intellectual sociability contributed to a binary distinction between the lettered and unlettered, the cultured and the uncultured. This

⁵ G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London, 1992), 207; R. H. Sweet, 'Topographies of Politeness', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 12 (Dec., 2002), 370.

⁶ On inner and outer virtue, see also P. Carter, 'Polite "Persons": Character, Biography and the Gentleman', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 12 (2002), 335-338.

⁷ L. E. Klein, 'Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Dec., 2002), 873.

definition created social categories based on an individual's engagement with culture, specifically literature and knowledge, rather than their attention to form in social interactions.

II. Culture

In terms of the structures of culture, this thesis has argued that the reading association's committee and community were the architecture of an embodied reading public, and these communities provided a more tangible connection to the public than a lone reader could achieve. By sharing resources in reading associations, and discussing print in person and through correspondence networks, these individuals recognised their mutual identity as readers. Associations highlighted these sentimental connections, describing themselves as 'friends to literary information' and 'lovers of learning'. Literary sociability became a basis for claims to gentility, and polite and intellectual activities were made available to wider swathes of people. Associations construed their members as citizens of the reading public, making all members equal in their submission to bureaucracy and moral regulation. This enacted the polite 'illusion of a civil society based on quasi-democratic principles of civic humanism', and perhaps was one of the more successful venues in which this social levelling took place.⁸ This thesis complements R. J. Morris' interpretation of nineteenth-century voluntary societies as integral tools in the self-definition of the middle classes, by showing their status functions in the preceding decades.⁹ In examining the structures of associations throughout the period from 1760 to 1830, this research has shown the origins of the bureaucratic structures and society procedures which became so prevalent in the mid-nineteenth century.

⁸ H. Berry, 'Polite Consumption: Shopping in Eighteenth-Century England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 12 (2002), 393.

⁹ R. J. Morris, *Class, Sect and Party: The Making of the British Middle Class, Leeds 1820-1850* (Manchester, 1990).

This study of associational life has also advanced research which indicates that the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century home had public valences,¹⁰ and indeed reconfigures the supposedly 'public' stage of associational life as dependent upon the home. Lawrence Klein specifies several aspects of the public sphere, including the magisterial (state) public sphere, the civic public sphere, the economic public sphere and the associative public sphere.¹¹ Associations, whilst naturally falling into the cultural production of the latter sphere, can also be construed as economic institutions (concerned with the purchase and dissemination of cultural products) as well as civic entities, and even related to the state through their loyalist values. Women's involvement in associations thus indicates their ability to engage with a range of aspects of 'public' life from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, and the spatial importance of the home to associational life further collapses the physical distinction of public and private locales. The historiographical depiction, principally advocated by William St Clair, of associations as homosocial environments (contrasted with female circulating libraries) has been rebutted,¹² with evidence that they were in fact a catholic social forum, mixing women, family members, the old and the young.

Furthermore, this study of reading associations indicates that contemporaries did not always experience clear divisions between 'private' and 'public' stages. The home was intimately involved, ideologically and practically, with the association; the association derived its identity from, and contributed to the character of, its locality; and the locality was elevated as a component of the reading public, with associations evidencing their community's participation in national culture. Readers did not exist in two mental planes, with universalist, or national values overlaid onto parochial life.¹³ The literary culture of associations has been shown to have been more than just a metropolitan derivative, and instead drew on local trade and regional networks. Indeed, the contemporary craze for reading as evidenced by these associations can be argued to have dislocated literary culture and sociability from their urban locations, because books provided company and interaction wherever they were read.

¹⁰ L. E. Klein, 'Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth Century: Some Questions about Evidence and Analytic Procedure', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (1996), 104-105; B. Cowan, 'What was Masculine about the Public Sphere? Gender and the Coffeehouse Milieu in Post-Restoration England', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Spring, 2001), 149; A. Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (London, 2003), 202; K. Harvey, *The Little Republic: Masculinity and Domestic Authority in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2012).

¹¹ Klein, 'Gender', 103-104.

¹² W. St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge, 2004), 250, 252, 259-260.

¹³ Klein, 'Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century', 876.

Reading associations were deeply embedded in their locality, whilst simultaneously forging connections with and consciousness of a national literary public. The attention given to place within this thesis marks a new departure in studies of associational culture, which often aggregate associations into one homogenous model, or merely hint at their relationship to local and national culture.

More generally, this case study of reading associations has illuminated the pervasiveness of clubs in eighteenth-century society. Their physical presence has been established by Peter Clark, who suggests there were 25,000 clubs in the Anglophone world in the eighteenth century. Periodical literature such as *The Spectator* spread the idea of the club as a metaphor for the reading public, and society more generally. This thesis has argued that reading associations (in their rules, at least) were idealised projections of the community principles which this large body of provincial, propertied people advocated. The club was thus a metaphor for society, and was an important frame through which individuals were able to relate to wider culture. Associational philosophies of improvement nested individual endeavours in community and society-wide projects for improvement, positing a corporatist vision of society rather than a solely individualistic self-help agenda.

III. Enlightenment

Finally, this thesis has analysed clubs and societies as evidence of enlightenment philosophies of sociability and improvement. Reading associations engaged with enlightenment thought, not only through the reading of enlightenment texts, but through their philosophy of sociability. The improving activities of individuals were valorised by associations and their broader communities, raising up exemplars of Enlightenment, which was broadly defined as social, intellectual and practical improvement. Rather than following Allan's assertion that 'the true location of the Enlightenment... was surely the library', this

thesis has stressed that associational Enlightenment was a process, involving not just the books of these institutions but also the relationships, mentalities and cultural programmes which they fostered.¹⁴ Despite the different infrastructure and contexts of literary production in England and Scotland,¹⁵ the ordinary consumers of these works can be said to have shared a similar 'British' experience of the Enlightenment.

Dena Goodman's analysis of the French salon as a form of enlightenment sociability can be fruitfully compared to the outline of reading association culture which has been presented in the thesis; indeed, Roy Porter has argued that clubs 'fulfilled certain of the functions of the Paris salon'.¹⁶ Goodman argued that French salons, as a particular location for enlightenment ideas and social practices, were based on friendship, conversation and correspondence. This spatial practice of gathering a 'public' (in terms of their stated aims of bringing improvement to their broader society, as well as instantiating the collective opinions of the learned) in a domestic location parallels the way in which reading associations bridged home and public locations. Furthermore, this form of enlightenment sociability was an expression of a long-standing 'republic of letters', a transnational, intellectual community of citizens who formed an ideal state of literary and learned exchange.¹⁷ This powerful unifying idea of a learned community of citizens was employed by the British reading associations considered in this thesis, and they could therefore be considered to be the British mode of the enlightenment republic of letters.

Elements of the French salon differ from the British associational model, and problematise the direct correlation between the two institutions. First, salons were governed by women, because their 'selflessness' in the face of combative intellectualism enabled them to mediate conflict and harmonize intellectual exchange, according to Goodman.¹⁸ Conversely, reading associations gave this authority to elected committees, usually of men, thus vesting their hopes for order in the morality of an accountable community, rather than the gendered ideologies of civility or politeness. Second, the associations primarily focused on reading, whereas the salons were conceived as conversational communities. This may

¹⁴ Allan, *Nation*, 214.

¹⁵ R. B. Sher, *The Enlightenment & the Book: Scottish Authors and their Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Ireland and America* (London, 2006), 21.

¹⁶ D. Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (London, 1994); R. Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London, 2000), 37.

¹⁷ Goodman, *Republic*, 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

link to a third difference: the comparative exclusivity of the 'high-society' Parisian authors and artists who constituted the salons, when contrasted with the ubiquitous, middling-sort reading associations.

The reading associations could thus be construed as consuming communities, coming together to form a public audience rather than a vanguard of those who discovered or created knowledge. The salons' ideal of conversation between enlightenment-producers was translated into the reading associations' ideal of conversation between the reader and the author through the medium of their printed words. In fact, Goodman identifies French provincial readers as part of the republic of letters through their subscription, reading and clubs:¹⁹ this thesis has closely examined this component of the republic of letters in a British context. There was similitude in the practices and structures of the salon-producers (or high culture) and associational-consumers (or everyday culture) of enlightenment ideas, particularly in their sites of domestic-publicity and their role as tangible nodes of an abstract community. The producers and the consumers of enlightenment thought were mutually dependent, and united by shared practices and conceptions of the egalitarian sociability of intellectual culture.

Does this similitude between the operations of French enlightenment salons, and British reading associations, suggest that the mechanisms of enlightenment culture transcended national contexts? Were reading associations part of an international community, or a component of a distinctly national culture? The British reading associations examined here did encounter European writers, but often in translation: theirs was primarily an anglophone print culture. The local and national valences of these reading communities therefore distinguished them from the international republic of letters, which had originally corresponded in Latin. Further research is needed in order to establish whether the reading association culture examined in this thesis was a particularly British response to enlightenment ideas,²⁰ or part of a broader development of the enlightenment public sphere

¹⁹ Ibid., 179.

²⁰ On British exceptionalism, see P. Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford, 2000), 5; J. Archbold, 'Book Clubs and Reading Societies in the Late Eighteenth Century', in J. Kelly and M. J. Powell (eds), *Clubs and Societies in Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin, 2010), 138-139 suggests there were ten times more reading associations in England than Ireland.

across Europe or the Atlantic.²¹ The analysis of British associations could be further illuminated by examining the relationship between reading associations and domestic institutions for the literati, such as the Royal Society. While this thesis has examined Scottish and English associations, investigating the evolution of national culture from the early eighteenth-century union, further research could examine the place of nineteenth-century Ireland in this 'national' narrative.

Over the period considered in this thesis, the number of reading associations grew in number, and they became firmly entrenched in literary culture. In some ways, their practices and principles remained constant: they read across a variety of genres, with the aid of periodical literature; they emphasised their values of propriety, intellectual improvement and equality; and the proportion of women and kin participating in associations was similar both before and after 1800. However, changing political circumstances affected associational self-presentation in the 1790s, when they sought to distance themselves from radicalism, and assert their loyalty to the state. In the early nineteenth century, changes to cultural priorities and social organisation led to the development of specialised forms of association such as the Mechanics' Institutes, which numbered 700 by 1850.²² Learned associations began to define the socio-demographic position of their desired members: the Western Literary and Scientific Institution was for 'persons engaged in commercial and professional pursuits',²³ and the Literary and Scientific Institution of Tottenham Court Road existed for the promotion of the 'well being of the working classes, members, and inhabitants of the metropolis'.²⁴ Reading associations' generalism and lack of occupational specificity therefore mark them out from the specialised educational initiatives of the nineteenth century.

Another change was that nineteenth-century associations tended to conceive of the library as part of a panoply of other educational facilities. The prototype London Mechanics' Institution and the expensive Islington Literary and Scientific Society, founded ten years apart in 1823 and 1833 respectively, advertised similar facilities including lectures, experiments, a

²¹ e.g. see E. S. Eide, 'Reading Societies and Lending Libraries in Nineteenth-Century Norway', *Library and Information History*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (June, 2010), 121-138; R. Van Dülmen, *The Society of the Enlightenment: The Rise of the Middle Class and Enlightenment Culture in Germany*, transl. A. Williams (Cambridge, 1992), 83.

²² M. D. Stephens and G. W. Roderick, 'Science, the Working Classes and Mechanics' Institutes', *Annals of Science*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (2006), 353.

²³ LMA, MR/SLR/16 Western Literary and Scientific Institution, 7.

²⁴ LMA, MR/SLR/22 Literary and Scientific Institution Tottenham Court Road, 1.

library and a museum.²⁵ This reflects the popularisation of 'scientific' culture as both a form of entertainment and artisanal improvement, which is often conceived as a cultural shift from the literary to the scientific. However, such institutions had a similar remit to the Literary and Philosophical Societies, which were founded from the 1780s, with a second wave in the 1820s. The Literary and Philosophical Societies, despite historiographical associations with technological advance and innovation, have since been defined as institutions for 'polite, indeed ornamental' science, and thus were 'cultural outlets for [the] upwardly mobile'.²⁶ Rather than regarding literary and philosophical societies, and subsequent scientific organisations, as 'higher order activities' than reading associations,²⁷ this thesis has argued for reading associations' serious improving purposes and intended application of knowledge. Reading associations were an intersection between the sociably-improving associations of the eighteenth century, and the learned and educational societies of the nineteenth century, and they attest to the continuities in cultures of knowledge and improvement across this period.

The reading associations considered in this period were community endeavours, funded by the personal subscriptions of their members. They existed alongside commercial circulating libraries, and other forms of institutional provision such as ecclesiastical, university or national libraries. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the provision of books came to be seen as something which would ideally be free, and universally accessible: this was achieved through the Public Libraries Act of 1850, which permitted local authorities to levy rates to finance libraries.²⁸ Thus, the story of reading associations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries might seem to have been a success, with the importance of reading and education for all being recognised by the establishment of publicly-funded institutions.

Yet the public library has been challenged by the changing circumstances of our digital age. Since 2010, 343 UK council-run libraries have been closed.²⁹ In a protest against

²⁵ LMA, MR/SLR/1 Islington Literary and Scientific Society, 3; LMA, MR/SLR/5 London Mechanics' Institution, 9-10.

²⁶ A. Thackray, 'Natural Knowledge in Cultural Context: The Manchester Mode', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 79, No. 3 (Jun., 1974), 705; J. Golinski, *Science as Public Culture: Chemistry and Enlightenment in Britain, 1760-1820* (Cambridge, 1992), 58.

²⁷ J. Stobart, A. Hann, and V. Morgan, *Spaces of Consumption: Leisure and Shopping in the English Town, c.1680-1830* (London, 2007), 32.

²⁸ T. Kelly, *Early Public Libraries: A History of Public Libraries in Great Britain before 1850* (London, 1966), 237.

²⁹ 'Libraries lose a quarter of staff as hundreds close', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-35707956> [4 May 2016].

library closures in London in 2016, screenwriter Mark Gatiss wrote that 'we remove these pieces of civilisation at our peril'.³⁰ Bestselling author Karin Slaughter argues that libraries are a 'civil right'.³¹ This thesis has argued that eighteenth-century associations began this cultural institutionalisation of libraries. Their founders argued that literary sociability demonstrated individual members' civility; that associations contributed to the civic pride of the community; and that readers were equal citizens of the broader, national public. The long eighteenth century's languages of community participation as individuals, townspeople and citizens have been narrowed into modern assertions of libraries' twin significance as a civil right and a part of our civilisation. Perhaps a key reason for the current demise of libraries is our neglect of the importance of local communities in these cultural endeavours. One solution has been to return public libraries to management by voluntary associations: 174 have been transferred to community groups, and volunteer numbers have doubled.³² Ordinary people are therefore continuing to intervene in the dissemination of books amongst their local communities: and, as this thesis has shown, they can be a powerful cultural force.

³⁰ '5 Famous British TV Writers On How Libraries Influenced Their Lives', https://www.buzzfeed.com/garethm4f1f77e98/tv-writers-libraries?utm_term=.bm2xPD1wn#.jdDBe5gm6 [4 May 2016].

³¹ K. Slaughter, 'Fight for Libraries as You Do Freedom', in *The Library Book* (Bungay, 2012), 168.

³² 'Libraries lose a quarter of staff as hundreds close', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-35707956> [4 May 2016].

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027.441 Air	Minutes of the Ayr Library Society 1831-1868
027.441 Air	Minutes of the Ayr Library Society Committee 1802-1821
027.441 Air	Ayr Library Cash Book 1776-1814
027.2 Ayr	Minute Book of the Air Mechanics Institute
027.2 Ayr	Mechanics Institution Issue Book and Members 1836-1852

Bodleian Library, Oxford

G. A. Warw b.1 (777)	<i>Articles established for the Government of a Book Society in the City of Coventry</i>
G. Pamph. 540 (1)	<i>A catalogue of the books of the Bampton Reading Society (1815)</i>
MS. Don. c. 191	Barbara Johnson Letters
MS. Don. c. 192	Barbara Johnson Letters
MS. Eng. misc. c. 36	Cottle's book club poem
MS. Eng. misc. e. 128	William Stukeley's commonplace book 1749
MS. Eng. misc. e. 200	Diary of John Greenhill
MS. Top. Berks. e.1	Abingdon Reading and Library Society 1812
MS. Top. Gloucestershire d. 1	Dursley Reading Society Purchases 1819-32
MS. Top. Gloucestershire e. 4	Dursley Reading Society Cash Book 1818-29
MS. Top. Gloucestershire e. 5	Dursley Reading Society Rough Book 1820-6
MS. Top. Gloucestershire e. 6	Dursley Reading Society Sale Book 1829-46
MS. Top. Gloucestershire e. 7	Dursley Reading Society Loans 1832-1845
MS. Top. Gloucestershire e. 8	Dursley Reading Society Loans 1847-54
MS. Top. Gloucestershire f. 1	Dursley Reading Society Minutes 1821-34

Bodleian Library, Oxford, John Johnson Collection

Circulating Libraries Box 2	(22a) Chester Public Library
	(26) Nantwich Book Society
	(29) Penzance Library
Circulating Libraries Box 3	(2) Durham Subscription Library

Circulating Libraries Box 5	(44) Ladies Book Society at Cheltenham
	(9) Public Library Town of Southport
	(10) Wigan Subscription Library
	(12) Liverpool Library
	(30) Brunswick Mill Manchester
	(36) Manchester Circulating Library
	(39a) Manchester Subscription Library
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	(64) Boston Permanent Library
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	(62) Wolverhampton Library
	(68) Beccles Book Society
	(72) Bury Library Room
	(94a) Battle Book Club
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	(42) Worcester Library
	(62) Masham Book Society
	(65) Ripon Library
	(67) Sheffield Book Society
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Circulating Libraries Box 8	Book Society of Twelve, 1819
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D/HH/10/2/5-8	Barnard Castle Book Club Sale Lists
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D/HH/10/2/22	Barnard Castle Book Club Sale List
D/HH/10/2/40-183	Barnard Castle Book Club Receipts
D/X/1355/1	Westgate Library

Gloucestershire Archives

D1548/8/4	Nailsworth Reading Society
D9125/1/8267	Special Constables
P379 MI 1	Wotton-under-Edge reading society

Hornel Library, Broughton House

MS 5/27	Wigton Subscription Library
MS 18/26	Wigton Subscription Library Account Book
MS 11/29	Wigton Library Subscribers and Withdrawals Book 1828-1835
MS 11/30	Wigton Subscription Library Subscribers and Withdrawals Book 1832-1836

Hull History Centre

UDDSY/79/2	New Malton Subscription Library Laws
UDSL/3	Hull Subscription Library Minutes
UDSL/6	Hull Subscription Library Transactions
UDSL/13	Hull Subscription Library
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MS 1695	Wye Book Club Papers. Accounts 1764-1776
MS 1696	Wye Book Club Papers. Accounts 1776-1807
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MS2571/1/1/2	Book Club Minutes
MS2571/4/1/1	Original Freeth Invitations
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027 LYC 1/2/1	Liverpool Lyceum Committee Minute Book
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MR/SLR/6	Mary-le-bone Literary and Scientific Institution, Portman Square
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