

# *The English Common Reader*

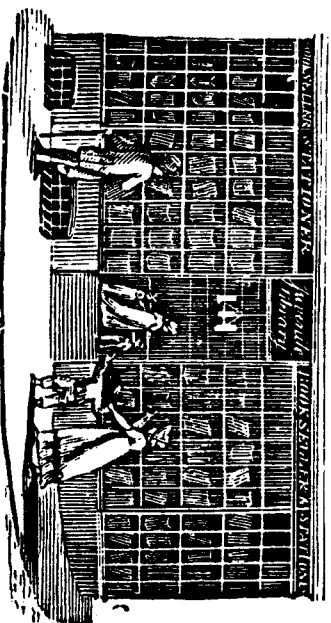
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*A Social History  
of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900*

SECOND EDITION

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WITH A FOREWORD BY JONATHAN ROSE



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*Columbus*

the librarian, Dr. Stanley Pargellis, and his staff for their great helpfulness.

A number of my friends have read portions of my manuscript and given me the benefit of their special knowledge in certain fields. In particular I must thank Professor John Harold Wilson, who plowed through the whole book, and Professor Oscar Maurer, of the University of Texas, who read the chapters on periodicals. And I owe a special debt to the numerous scholars in the field of nineteenth-century English literature and social history who, in conversation and correspondence, helped sustain my conviction that the project was worth carrying forward.

My wife, Helen, has figured in the prefatory paragraphs of my earlier books, but now my gratitude is infinitely greater; not least because she, along with our two daughters, endured with cheerful fortitude the many trials incident to having an author in the house.

R. D. A.

## Introduction

I. This volume is an attempt to study, from the historian's viewpoint, the place of reading in an industrial and increasingly democratic society. It is the story of how, through numberless tribulations, and against what sometimes appeared to be hopeless odds, there took root and eventually flourished in nineteenth-century England a revolutionary social concept: that of the democracy of print.

Despite its enormous importance in social and cultural history, the growth of the mass reading public in England has never been systematically analyzed and documented.<sup>1</sup> The complexity of the development, in which much of its fascination lies, seemingly has not even been recognized. Everybody knows that in the nineteenth century the number of English readers, and therefore the productions of the press, multiplied spectacularly. By and large, however, the phenomenon has been taken for granted; the whys and hows have not been inquired into.

Historians who have glanced at the development of the mass reading public have drawn for the most part upon two kinds of data: anecdotes and the records of best-selling books and popular

<sup>1</sup> In the second half of his little book, *The Old Printer and the Modern Press* (1854), Charles Knight attempted something of the sort, without, however, exploring the ramifications of the subject. Modest though it is, and ending just at the time when the mass public was entering upon its greatest period of expansion, Knight's has remained the only connected narrative of the English common reader. R. K. Webb's recent monograph, *The British Working Class Reader*, deals with only a small segment of the subject treated in the present volume, though within its chosen scope it is authoritative and refreshingly corrective of received opinion.

NOTE.—Full bibliographical information concerning most of the references given in the footnotes in abbreviated form will be found in the Bibliography. The exceptions are references to books and articles which are drawn upon infrequently and which as a whole are not of sufficient importance to merit inclusion in the Bibliography. Full citations for these are given on their first occurrence in each chapter. The place of publication, unless otherwise stated, is London.

periodicals. The present writer, as many passages in the following chapters will show, is not one to scorn either kind of information. The anecdote is often a valuable microcosm of history. Our knowledge would be so much the poorer if we did not have Coleridge's anecdote of how, when soliciting subscriptions for his periodical the *Watchman*, he tackled a Calvinist tallow-chandler in Birmingham. After listening silently to Coleridge's sales talk, which, if it was anything like his later philosophical monologues, must have been an impressive performance, the chandler asked how much the *Watchman* would cost. Founpence, said Coleridge; thirty-two pages an issue, large octavo, closely printed. "Thirty and two pages!" exclaimed his prospect. "Bless me! why except what I does in a family way on the Sabbath, that's more than I ever reads, Sir! all the year round."<sup>2</sup>

Nor is it irrelevant to recall the many stories of Scott's fame among all classes of society—for example, of a London workman accosting Charles Lamb to point in awe to the author of *Waverley* crossing the street.<sup>3</sup> We hear of the old charwoman who never missed a subscription tea conducted on the first Monday of every month at a snuff shop over which she lodged, when the landlord read the newest number of *Dombey and Son* to his assembled guests.<sup>4</sup> And of the vagrant in Covent Garden who, according to Thackeray's daughter, plucked at Tennyson's sleeve, saying, "Look here, sir, here am I. I've been drunk for six days out of the seven, but if you will shake me by the hand, I'm damned if I ever get drunk again."<sup>5</sup> And of the three hundred soldiers in the Boer War who, after listening to Violet Hunt lecture on poetry, stayed to take down from dictation, in pocket Testaments and on the backs of envelopes, lines from Browning's "Epilogue to *Asolanido*" which had caused a stir when she quoted them in the course of her talk.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, it is useful to know that the sale in monthly parts of Dickens' novels averaged about 40,000 copies and that, from the

<sup>2</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, chap. x.

<sup>3</sup> Lamb, *Letters*, ed. E. V. Lucas (New Haven, 1935), III, 344-45.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, *Charles Dickens*, II, 613.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Thackeray Ritchie, *Records of Tennyson, Ruskin, Browning* (New York, 1892), p. 82.

<sup>6</sup> *Spectator*, LXXXIX (1902), 607.

fifties onward, popular papers like the *Family Herald* and the *London Journal* had circulations reaching into six figures. Such statistics are indispensable indications of popular taste and of the steady expansion of the audience for printed matter. But even if we collect as many figures as we can, we are still left with only a superficial impression of our subject. To describe and measure the spread of reading by such means is relatively easy. To account for it, and to fix it against the panoramic background of nineteenth-century English history, is a more complex task.

For the mass reading public had its roots deep in the total history of the period. Far from being an isolated phenomenon, it was the resultant of many forces, most of which—political, religious, economic, technological—seem on first glance to have little bearing on the growth of the reading habit. But once we have exposed the hidden tendrils of association, we discover that few major tendencies in nineteenth-century English social life were without their effect. Some stimulated the taste for reading; some inhibited it; some, paradoxically, did both. Hence, to understand how the common Englishman came to be a reader, we must first review the dominant social and political attitudes of the time and recall how they often masqueraded as religious piety. We must explore the prejudices, inherited from earlier centuries and intensified by the panic of the French Revolution, which stood in the way of decent education and cheap literature for the common people and which strewed the path of innovations like mechanics' institutes and free libraries with disheartening obstacles.

The history of the mass reading audience is, in fact, the history of English democracy seen from a new angle. In 1840 Carlyle wrote to John Sterling, "Books are written by martyr-men, not for rich men alone but for all men. If we consider it, every human being has, by the nature of the case, a *right* to hear what other wise human beings have spoken to him. It is one of the Rights of Men; a very cruel injustice if you deny it to a man!"<sup>7</sup> The struggle for political democracy, it is true, normally did not stress the right of the common man to read, though, at the time Carlyle wrote, the moral-force Chartists, led by William Lovett, had adopted this as one of their great principles. The ordinary man had more immediate necessities to contend for, such as steady employment, better

<sup>7</sup> *New Letters of Carlyle*, ed. Alexander Carlyle (1904), I, 212.

wages and working conditions, the right to organize unions, and parliamentary representation. But beneath the surface the issue was there, all the same. It was increasingly crucial because under the conditions of industrial life the ability to read was acquiring an importance it had never had before. The popular cultural tradition, which had brought amusement and emotional outlets to previous generations, had largely been erased. The long hours and the monotony of work in factory and shop, the dismal surroundings in which people were condemned to spend such leisure as they had, the regimentation of industrial society with its consequent crushing of individuality, made it imperative that the English millions should have some new way of escape and relaxation, some new and plentiful means of engaging their minds and imaginations. Books and periodicals were the obvious answer. But the goal was no easier to win than that of political and economic justice—and for the same reasons.

The many threads which in sum constitute the history of the English common reader are therefore woven deep in the fabric of nineteenth-century annals. And just as the various attitudes and movements of the age fatefully molded the audience for print that eventually emerged, so did that public, in turn, affect the progress of the age itself. Is it possible, for instance, to understand how the balance of political power shifted from a small oligarchy to a popular electorate without reviewing the spread of reading? Behind the Reform Bills of 1832 and 1867, which were formal landmarks in the political transformation of England, lay the press and its steadily enlarging public. Despite the high prices necessitated by taxation—itsself a political issue of great moment—the newspaper press, shaking off the venality that had been its shame under Pitt, became a forthright, independent mouthpiece of middle-class opinion and eventually brought about the transfer of power to that class during the early Victorian era. At the same time the philippics of Cobbett in his *Political Register* and the brutal parodies of William Hone, which aroused the workingman from his political apathy, paved the way for a radical press that endured persecution and suppression to undermine, in turn, the foundations of middle-class rule. The hard-hitting political commentary of mass-circulation weekly newspapers conducted by men like Edward Lloyd and G. W. M. Reynolds helped build up the pressure which, after the

middle of the century, forced the governing class to concede more and more power to the artisan and laborer.

No less important was the effect the spread of reading had upon the social habits of the Victorian era. Never before in English history had so many people read so much. In the middle class, the reading circle was the most familiar and beloved of domestic institutions; and as cheap printed matter became more accessible, hardly a family in Britain was without its little shelf of books and its sheaf of current periodicals, whether church papers or the latest hair-raising episodes concocted by Holywell Street hacks. Though in the first half of the century there was deep (and not wholly idle) apprehension that making the "lower ranks" of society literate would breed all sorts of disorder and debauchery, in the long run the proliferation of reading matter proved to have been the oil that was needed to quiet the troubled waters. If the common man did not necessarily become wiser after he had an abundant supply of printed matter at his command, he was certainly kept amused. The comparative tranquillity of Victorian society after mid-century was due in no small part to the growth of the popular press.

Above all, the democratizing of reading led to a far-reaching revolution in English culture. No longer were books and periodicals written chiefly for the comfortable few; more and more, as the century progressed, it was the ill-educated mass audience with pennies in its pocket that called the tune to which writers and editors danced. In 1858 Wilkie Collins, announcing his personal discovery of "the unknown public" which bought huge quantities of cheap fiction papers, wrote: "The Unknown Public is, in a literary sense, hardly beginning, as yet, to learn to read. The members of it are evidently, in the mass, from no fault of theirs, still ignorant of almost everything which is generally known and understood among readers whom circumstances have placed, socially and intellectually, in the rank above them. . . . The future of English fiction may rest with this Unknown Public, which is now waiting to be taught the difference between a good book and a bad. It is probably a question of time only. The largest audience for periodical literature, in this age of periodicals, must obey the universal law of progress, and must, sooner or later, learn to discriminate. When that period comes, the readers who rank by millions, will be the readers who give the widest reputations, who return the

richest rewards, and who will, therefore, command the service of the best writers of their time. A great, an unparalleled prospect awaits, perhaps, the coming generation of English novelists. To the penny journals of the present time belongs the credit of having discovered a new public. When that public shall discover its need of a great writer, the great writer will have such an audience as has never yet been known."<sup>8</sup>

This is the voice of prophecy indeed, though most people will feel that it is tinged with what, in the event, has proved an unwarranted optimism. The impact of the mass public upon modern English literature—taking the term in the widest possible sense—is incalculable. Though a great deal has been said on the subject between Collins' day and our own, no truly serious study has yet been made of it. The widely held opinion that the coming of the democratic audience vulgarized literature may well be correct, but to test it is no part of our design. For (and this sentence ideally should be printed in bold red letters, to forestall unfounded expectations) this volume is not intended to be an examination of nineteenth-century literary taste, or of the effect the new mass public had upon the practice of contemporary writers. Inevitably, the problem of taste will be touched upon now and again, in connection with other topics. But our present design is not to analyze the popular literature of the period as such. Instead, one of the main purposes of this book is to provide some of the information that obviously must be taken into account before anyone can safely interpret the popular taste of an age—information, that is, on the social composition, educational experience, and general character of the public whose taste is to undergo scrutiny. The lack of such knowledge inevitably makes discussion of the audience' formative influence upon literature little more than idle speculation.

Since the term "reading public" has always been used elastically, attention must be called to the qualifying word "mass" in the subtitle. The reading public studied in this book is the one composed of what the Victorians were fond of calling "the million." It is *not* the relatively small, intellectually and socially superior audience for which most of the great nineteenth-century authors wrote—the readers of the quarterly reviews, the people

<sup>8</sup> Collins, "The Unknown Public," p. 222.

whom writers like Macaulay, the Brontës, Meredith, George Eliot, and John Stuart Mill had in mind. Here we are concerned primarily with the experience of that overwhelmingly more numerous portion of the English people who became day-by-day readers for the first time in this period, as literacy spread and printed matter became cheaper. The "common reader" studied in these pages may be a member of the working class, or he may belong to the ever expanding bourgeoisie. In preceding centuries, as the opening chapters will show, some hand-workers and some members of the lower-middle class had been readers; but not until the nineteenth century did the appetite for print permeate both classes to the extent that it became a major social phenomenon.

One or two biases on the part of the author may as well be admitted at the outset. One is that genuine democracy resides not alone in the possession of certain social, political, and economic advantages but in the unqualified freedom of all men and women to enjoy the fruits of a country's culture, among which books have a place of high, if not supreme, importance. This is a concept which, though it was increasingly voiced in the course of the nineteenth century, especially by those thinkers who like Carlyle were most devoted to the idea of human dignity, was not widely accepted until near our own time. And as the currents of antedemocratic thought surge through the mid-twentieth-century world, that concept is again being denied, at least by implication.

Twenty-five years ago an American journalist, R. L. Duffus, put the matter so eloquently and succinctly that a direct quotation may well serve to express the credo underlying this volume:

"It may be that only a small minority are capable of that exhilarating and strenuous pursuit of truth and beauty which great literature demands. It may be that even those who strive for 'culture' for snobbish and unworthy reasons are not much more numerous, and that underneath these layers of the truly cultured and their pathetic imitators lies a barbaric mass which can never be deeply penetrated by civilization. If these things are true, the cultural missionary, whether in literature, in the arts, or in the sciences, might as well pack his trunk and sail for home. I do not think they are true.

"Undoubtedly there will always be variations in the ability to appreciate, just as there are variations in the ability to create.

Great readers will not be as scarce as great writers, but they will be a chosen company. There are ideas so subtle that the democratic mass is shut off from them. But I do not believe these ideas are as numerous as is sometimes assumed. I believe that the failure of the democratic majority to accept intellectual and aesthetic ideals is due rather to a lack of will to do so than to a lack of ability. And I believe that the lack of will is due to false and imperfect systems of education and to other conditions in the environment which can be altered. The culturability of mankind—if I may invent a word—ought not to be judged by its response to stimuli which until yesterday were enjoyed almost wholly by a leisure class. Only an abysmal ignorance of human nature can account for such assumptions.”<sup>9</sup>

Of course not all men want to read; not all men, for that matter, have any conscious interest in achieving or preserving political democracy. Nothing that education can do, probably, will ever induce some people to become habitual readers. On the other hand it is a basic assumption of this book that among the masses of people in the nineteenth century there were, just as there are today, hundreds of thousands and indeed millions whom force of circumstance alone barred from the stimulating and solacing influences of books.

II. Though this is the first large-scale work on the reading public as a social phenomenon, the writer hopes and believes it will not be the last. As has been suggested, our knowledge of the subtle relationships between literature and society is still scanty. We are beginning to understand the effect of general social conditions upon the production of literature; but the role of the reader—the consumer—has been largely neglected. Such commentary as exists on the topic is offhand and impressionistic. The present book does not pretend to be exhaustive in any one of the many areas it touches. There is room for literally hundreds of studies of topics which are here merely sketched. No manuscript sources have been used, and only a few selected periodicals, out of all that nineteenth-century England produced, have been gone through systematically. Future students who concentrate on a single aspect of the reading public and its social and cultural im-

<sup>9</sup> R. L. Duffus, *Books: Their Place in a Democracy* (Boston, 1930), pp. xi-xii.

plications will bring to light much information unknown to the present writer, and sometimes they may be obliged to modify his generalizations. Though the purpose of this book is first of all to present a body of data and ideas which are useful and significant in themselves, hardly less dominant is the desire to provide a preliminary map of the vast territory, still virtually unexplored, which awaits the researcher.

Some readers undoubtedly will regret the omission of certain topics which bear more or less directly on the main theme of the book. But a line had to be drawn somewhere, else the book would never have been finished. Much could be said, for example, on the contribution that juvenile literature made to the early instilling of a taste for reading. Apart from the praiseworthy efforts of John Newbery in the eighteenth century, little attempt was made to provide children with reading matter designed especially for them until Maria Edgeworth, Mrs. Sherwood, and the Sunday-school tract writers sharpened their pens early in the nineteenth century. Then came the deluge; but that story requires a volume to itself.

Another relevant topic that has been reluctantly omitted is the many-faceted one of the relationship between public and author. The books of Alexandre Beljame and A. S. Collins, as well as a few more recent articles, have described the changing economic status of the author from the Restoration down to the beginning of the Victorian era, but a great deal more needs to be written on the subject, especially from the age of Scott on. To what extent, for instance, did the authors' improved bargaining position, resulting from the increased demand for their wares, delay the cheapening of books and periodicals? What effect had the gradual substitution of the royalty system for the older practice of buying a literary property outright? The transformation of the economic basis of authorship and publishing in the nineteenth century—the degree to which it was caused by the rise of a mass public and, in turn, its effect upon that public—calls for much study.

There has not been space enough to do justice to Scotland's remarkable contribution to the expansion of the English reading public. That contribution, made through the example of Scottish institutions and the enterprise of individual Scotsmen, was much greater than the actual size of the Scottish population would suggest. The reading habit was democratized above the border long

before it was farther south, thanks to the strong Calvinist tradition of Bible study and the consequent emphasis upon schooling for all. Despite terrible poverty, in the eighteenth century the Scottish educational system was responsible for an incidence of literacy and book-reading strikingly greater than that in England. From Scotland, too, came the circulating library, and the cheap reprints which eventually led to the breaking of the London publishers' price-inflating monopoly on older books. And in the nineteenth century it was Scotsmen especially—Lord Brougham, Archibald Constable, the Chambers brothers, Samuel Brown of "itinerating library" fame—who in various ways helped enlarge the English reading audience.

Although the main body of the book is concerned with nineteenth-century developments, it has seemed advisable to devote the first three chapters to the prior history of the English reading public. This would not have been necessary were there any account to which the reader could be referred; but in the absence of such an account, written from approximately the same viewpoint as the one adopted in the present volume, the author has supplied one for the sake of historical continuity. In thus venturing outside his accredited "field," he has adopted a smaller scale of treatment and has relied heavily upon secondary sources rather than upon the contemporary materials on which his treatment of the nineteenth century is based. It is hoped, however, that those who possess an intimate knowledge of the centuries between Caxton and Tom Paine will find the first chapters to be a reasonably authentic narrative.

Extensive research in the many contiguous areas of history covered by a study such as this is not easy; the bibliographical jungle to be explored is enormous, and the existing maps are sketchy. Ponderous volumes of reports by parliamentary investigating committees and royal commissions; the windy expanses of *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*; league-long files of professional librarians' periodicals, book-trade journals, proceedings of statistical societies; official histories of publishing firms, so filled with decorous anecdotes and homage to the departed great, so devoid of solid information; solemn studies of political radicalism, economic conditions, religious philanthropy, the contentious history of English education; biographies by the hundreds—these are the dusty despair of the scholar quite as often as they are his delight.

Every social historian probably is sustained at his work by a sense, more or less peculiar to his occupation, of vicarious yet intimate contact with human beings in the simple process of being human. In the books that pass across his study table he feels the strong current of life as it was lived, not by the exceptional man, the statesman or the general or the artist, but by the humble millions who fade into the merciless anonymity of an epoch's history. To one intent upon tracing the development of the reading public, this sense is especially inspiring: for behind all the fine-print statistical tables, behind the orotund periods of the parliamentary debater, behind the squabbles over education and working hours and free libraries, shines the image of the ordinary man or woman at what is surely one of the happiest and most rewarding of human pursuits—the reading of the printed word.

If the living presence of the common reader has survived transference from the "sources" into these pages, then the moving human significance—the poignant, inspiring qualities—of the story to be told needs no further gloss.

Unemployed, dispossessed workmen gathering in alehouses to read radical papers that spell out the reasons for their misery and suggest desperate remedies. A rheumatic London crossing-sweeper crawling back to his cold, squalid room to pore over a copy of *Reynolds' Miscellany*.<sup>10</sup> Twenty men and women gathering in a locksmith's shop to listen to the newest number of the *Pickwick Papers*, borrowed from a circulating library at 2d. a day.<sup>11</sup> A Cockney fishmonger smoking his pipe, late at night, over three prized books—the *European Magazine* for 1761, *Tristram Shandy*, and *Gil Blas*.<sup>12</sup> A schoolboy putting down his penny for John Dicks's latest issue of a paper-covered play. A laborer meeting the hawker on Sunday morning to buy his Sabbath entertainment, a copy of the *Illustrated Times*, full of red-blooded murder. Apprentices trading well-thumbed numbers of *Cassell's Popular Educator*. . . .

This book, then, is about people: humble people for the most part, mechanics, clerks, shopmen, domestic servants, land workers, and their families; people who lived in the endless rows of jerry-

<sup>10</sup> Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, II, 538.

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, *Charles Dickens*, I, 155.

<sup>12</sup> William Hazlitt, "On Londoners and Country People," *Works*, ed. P. P. Howe (1932), XII, 74.

built city houses and along the village street. Numbering in mere thousands at first, then hundreds of thousands, then millions, they read because they wanted to find political salvation, or to discover the keys to the kingdom of heaven, or to make more money, or to exercise the emotions and imaginative cravings that were stifled in an England whose green and pleasant land was being built over with red-brick factories. Here, in short, is the story of the common reader, nameless but exceedingly numerous—how he came into being, and why; and what his fortunes were in an age of profound social change.

THE BACKGROUND  
1477-1800