




Reading against Reform: The Bristol Library Society and the Intellectual Culture of Bristol's Elections in 1812*

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This article pioneers a new methodological approach to the study of electoral politics by combining an analysis of the politics of reading, library association and the reading habits of electors in an English urban constituency in the early 19th century. By integrating an examination of reading practices and intellectual context into our analysis of electoral contests, political history scholars can go further in their examination of the unreformed electoral system and attempt to gauge the motivations behind voting habits and partisan identification in this period. Using electoral voting data and the records of an urban subscription library, this article explores the interrelation between the Bristol Library Society and Bristol's electoral politics, as well as conducting an analysis of which books were being borrowed and read by electors in a politically tumultuous year. Although few in number compared with the total size of Bristol's electorate, Bristol Library members were among some of the most politically and culturally influential individuals in Bristol society and were active participants in electoral contests in the city, either as candidates, campaigners, civic officials or voters. An analysis of their voting habits reveals that the library's membership reflected the Tory political hegemony that became pronounced in the city's civic politics. Moreover, an analysis of their reading habits in 1812 reveals an interest in political texts that were conservative and anti-Gallic in tone, that were representative of the political climate in Bristol in 1812, and which contributed to the defeat of candidates for reform in its electoral contests.

Keywords: anti-Jacobin; Bristol; civic politics; club; Edward Protheroe; extra-parliamentary party; libraries; reading; Samuel Romilly; voting

Combining an analysis of library records with voting records, this article will exhibit a new methodological approach to the study of electoral politics in Georgian Britain. Library records, particularly borrowing records, represent an underutilised source in the study of the political motivations of Britons in the unreformed electorate. An appreciation of the intellectual and reading context in which votes were cast enables us to deepen our analysis of political motivations and stimuli. The structural elements of politics, including networks of sociability and association, go a long way to explain the outcomes of electoral contests, yet

*My thanks to Dr Emma Macleod and Professor Katie Halsey for their comments on earlier drafts of this article. I am also grateful to the 'Eighteenth-Century Political Participation & Electoral Culture' project (hereafter ECPPEC) for sharing 1812 voting data for Bristol with me early. This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council [AH/R012717/1].

a study of reading habits, along with providing a greater appreciation for the local contexts in which elections were fought, can help to explain the formation of political opinions and voting intentions. This article cross-references electoral data from the October 1812 general election in Bristol with the borrowing records of the Bristol Library Society to examine the reading habits of the city's civic class quantitatively, so as to consider the potential influence reading played upon the formation of the intellectual climate in which this electoral contest was fought.¹ Though an exclusive establishment, the Bristol Library Society formed a key associational crutch to the maintenance of intellectual, cultural and political networks in the city, with its members consisting of some of Bristol's senior civic and political individuals. The borrowing records of this group reveal that they read a selection of books which shared a sense of anxiety at the safety and solidity of the British state, seemingly threatened by internal saboteurs and the belligerence of first Revolutionary and then Napoleonic France. Whether this reading of anti-French texts, many of which looked back to the early 1790s and the heady days of Revolutionary terror, shaped the political sentiments of these readers, or their political sentiments shaped their reading habits, the reading of these texts is representative of a strand of anti-Gallicanism which pervaded the electoral contest in Bristol in October 1812.

Since the late 1980s, a host of historical scholarship on the state and nature of the unreformed electoral system has rescued it from misinterpretations of whiggish history and the so-called 'reform perspective', the denigration of 18th-century society as 'unreformed' by 19th-century reformers.² The electoral system pre-1832 was not overwhelmingly venal, corrupt or stagnant; its electors were not the mindless pawns of regional magnates; and the system as a whole was not immune to change or limited reform.³ In rectifying these misconceptions, political historians have increasingly stressed the vibrant and dynamic nature of Georgian politics, particularly at a local level.⁴ In doing so, they have sought to define 'political awareness' in the Georgian voting public. Frank O'Gorman describes the 'political awareness' of the voter as emerging from his social and political environments and relationships, his image of himself and others, and his ideals, expectations and objective realities.⁵ In

¹In combining an analysis of electoral polling data with additional sources, this article follows a similar methodological approach to John Phillips's and James Bradley's studies of electoral behaviour: John Phillips, *The Great Reform Bill in the Boroughs: English Electoral Behaviour, 1818–41* (Oxford, 1992), 37–44; J.E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution, and English Radicalism: Nonconformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1990), 39–46.

²For the use of this phrase, see Joanna Innes and Arthur Burns, 'Introduction', in *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain 1780–1850*, ed. Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes (Cambridge, 2003), 4–7. For a defence of this 'Whig interpretation of history', see Annabel Patterson, *Nobody's Perfect: A New Whig Interpretation of History* (New Haven, 2002), 1–35.

³Frank O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons, and Parties: The Unreformed Electoral System of Hanoverian England, 1743–1832* (Oxford, 1989), 2–4; *Rethinking the Age of Reform*, ed. Burns and Innes; *The Many Lives of Corruption: The Reform of Public Life in Modern Britain c. 1750–1950*, ed. Ian Cawood and Tom Crook (Manchester, 2022).

⁴For some examples, see Phillips, *Great Reform Bill*; Gordon Pentland, *Radicalism, Reform and National Identity in Scotland, 1820–1833* (Woodbridge, 2008); Katrina Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism in Lancashire, 1798–1815* (Oxford, 2009).

⁵The concept of 'political awareness' is rarely explicitly defined but often discussed as a necessary requirement for 'public opinion' in this period: J.A.W. Gunn, *Beyond Liberty and Property: The Process of Self-Recognition in Eighteenth-Century Political Thought* (Kingston, Ontario, 1983), 263–315; H.T. Dickinson, *The Politics of the People in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke, 1995), 221–54; J.E. Bradley, 'The British Public and the American Revolution: Ideology, Interest and Opinion', in *Britain and the American Revolution*, ed. H.T. Dickinson (1998), 153–4.

turn, electoral behaviour ‘arises out of such powerfully held social, political, and even moral, standards and beliefs’.⁶ Setting aside the omission that ‘political awareness’ is defined only in respect to voters, and not those who did not have the vote but exercised political influence through other means, this definition also underplays the importance of ideas in motivating and shaping political engagement.⁷ One may go further in this instance and assess the role that reading played in the incubation or circulation of ideas among a politically engaged public.

The study of political print and print culture has formed a major aspect of this reassessment of the unreformed political system, although the significance of the reception and reading of such material rarely merits much discussion.⁸ Political biographies, for example, regularly record their subjects’ interactions with books and reading material, but typically do not undertake an analysis of their reading in any great depth.⁹ On the other hand, those political figures who were known particularly for their voracious reading have been studied within the field of the history of reading.¹⁰ These, like other studies of political reading, have focused on the individual, often exceptional reader, at the expense of the political reading habits of a collective.¹¹ By basing our analysis of political reading habits on library records, rather than individual reading records, it is possible to expand an analysis of the significance of reading to electoral politics to that of a whole community of readers.

For much of the 18th and 19th centuries, the Bristol Library Society served as Bristol’s foremost cultural and intellectual institution, as well as its largest and most popular lending library.¹² Founded in 1772, by the 1810s it boasted a membership of almost 300 and a

⁶O’Gorman, *Voters, Patrons, and Parties*, 225.

⁷H.T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (1977), 1–10.

⁸Stuart Andrews, *The British Periodical Press and the French Revolution, 1789–99* (Basingstoke, 2000); J.E. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace: Anti-War Liberalism in England, 1793–1815* (New York, 1982), 84–114; Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1996); Kevin Gilmartin, *Writing against Revolution: Literary Conservatism in Britain, 1790–1832* (Cambridge, 2006); M.O. Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel: British Conservatism and the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 2001); Ian Haywood, *The Revolution in Popular Literature: Print, Politics and the People, 1790–1860* (Cambridge, 2004); Jon Mee, *Print, Publicity and Popular Radicalism in the 1790s: The Laurel of Liberty* (Cambridge, 2016); J.J. Sack, *From Jacobite to Conservative: Reaction and Orthodoxy in Britain c. 1760–1832* (New York, 1993), 8–29.

⁹For an exception to this, though not strictly a biography, see David Bebbington, *The Mind of Gladstone: Religion, Homer, and Politics* (Oxford, 2004).

¹⁰K.J. Hayes, *The Road to Monticello: The Life and Mind of Thomas Jefferson* (Oxford, 2008); K.J. Hayes, *George Washington: A Life in Books* (Oxford, 2017); R.C. Windschffel, *Reading Gladstone* (Basingstoke, 2008).

¹¹Stephen Colclough, *Consuming Texts: Readers and Reading Communities, 1695–1870* (Basingstoke, 2007), 96–117; Mark Towsey, *Reading History in Britain and America, c.1750–c.1840* (Cambridge, 2019), 57–65; Julianne Lamond, ‘Representative Readers: Political Agency, Reading History, and the Case of Matthew Charlton’, *Library & Information History*, xxxvii (2021), 219–33. For a similar approach for a different context, see Geoff Baker, *Reading and Politics in Early Modern England: The Mental World of a Seventeenth-Century Catholic Gentleman* (Manchester, 2010).

¹²Paul Kaufman’s analysis of borrowings from the Bristol Library between 1773 and 1784, conducted in the 1950s, is still regularly cited by scholars: *The Minute Book of the Bristol Library Society, 1771–1801*, ed. Max Skjónsborg and Mark Towsey (Bristol Record Society, lxxv, 2022), xii n. 14; Paul Kaufman, *Borrowings from the Bristol Library, 1773–1784: A Unique Record of Reading Vögues* (Charlottesville, 1960). See also Kathleen Hapgood, ‘Library Practice in the Bristol Library Society, 1772–1830’, *Library History*, v (1981), 145–53; Kathleen Hapgood, *The Friends to Literature: Bristol Library Society 1772–1894* (Bristol, 2014); Max Skjónsborg, ‘“This Revolution in the Town”’: Richard Champion and the Early Years of the Bristol Library Society’, *Library & Information History*, xxxvii (2021), 149–67.

collection that numbered 7,709 books and 270 pamphlets.¹³ Critically, as a proprietary subscription library, ownership and management of the library was vested in its membership, in the form of annual regular meetings and an elected committee. This system of associational management, termed 'subscriber democracy' by Robert Morris, blended democratic and constitutionalist elements with an emphasis upon rights, regulations and conventions.¹⁴ Hierarchies within the library represented those from without, and committee positions were generally filled by civic elites, church ministers (both Anglican and dissenting), merchants, and medical and legal professionals.¹⁵ This was library politics as local politics writ small. These individuals, and the library's wider membership, formed an influential civic class who were deeply involved in Bristol's cultural and political life.¹⁶

The Bristol Library was a particularly established example of the subscription library, a form of library association that was widespread throughout the British Isles and North America by the first decade of the 19th century.¹⁷ The surviving records of these libraries provide us with an insight into the associational networks and power relations that underpinned such communities. Among these, the Bristol Library Society is unique for the scale of its borrowing records, which run from 1773 until 1857 and offer an unparalleled insight into the reading habits of an urban community in the 18th and 19th centuries.¹⁸

Bristol was an urban community with its own distinct and vibrant political culture.¹⁹ It was a prestigious electoral prize, the largest urban electorate outside of London and home to around 5,000 eligible voters at the start of the 19th century. It was, however, an expensive and difficult parliamentary constituency to control.²⁰ Its electoral politics in the 18th century was 'intensely oligarchical', with its political class formed of a collection of families and individuals who managed the civic administration of the city, were actively

¹³ *A Catalogue of the Books belonging to the Bristol Library Society* (Bristol, 1814), viii (hereafter *Catalogue* (1814)).

¹⁴ R.J. Morris, 'Clubs, Societies and Associations', in *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750–1950*, ed. F.M.L. Thompson (3 vols, Cambridge, 1990), iii, 412.

¹⁵ Bristol Archives (hereafter BA), 32079/153, minute book of annual general meetings, 2 Dec. 1772–28 Mar. 1870. For biographical sketches of the library's committee members in the 18th century, see *Minute Book*, ed. Skjónsborg and Towsey, 253–65.

¹⁶ Jonathan Barry, 'Bristol Pride: Civic Identity in Bristol, c. 1640–1775', in *The Making of Modern Bristol*, ed. Madge Dresser and Philip Ollerenshaw (Tiverton, 1996), 40–2; Martin Gorsky, *Patterns of Philanthropy: Charity and Society in Nineteenth-Century Bristol* (Woodbridge, 1999), 113–61; Mark Harrison, *Crowds and History: Mass Phenomena in English Towns, 1790–1835* (Cambridge, 2002), 57–89; Steve Poole and Nicolas Rogers, *Bristol from Below: Law, Authority and Protest in a Georgian City* (Woodbridge, 2017), 85–110.

¹⁷ There are estimated to have been over 350 subscription libraries active across the British Isles and North America by 1800: *Minute Book*, ed. Skjónsborg and Towsey, xii. For an overview of the growth of the subscription library movement, see David Allan, *A Nation of Readers: The Lending Library in Georgian England* (2008), 63–77; William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge, 2004), 246–54; K.A. Manley, *Books, Borrowers, and Shareholders. Scottish Circulating and Subscription Libraries before 1825* (Edinburgh, 2012), 17–45. For an overview of the different types of libraries active in this period and its nomenclature, see Katie Halsey, 'Types of Libraries', <https://borrowing.stir.ac.uk/types-of-libraries/> (accessed 26 Mar. 2023).

¹⁸ Bristol Central Library (hereafter BCL), B7453–7529, registers of the Bristol Library Society.

¹⁹ See Peter Brett, 'The Liberal Middle Classes and Politics in Three Provincial Towns: Newcastle, Bristol, and York – c. 1812–1841', University of Durham PhD, 1991; Harrison, *Crowds and History*, 205–20; Phillips, *Great Reform Bill*, 65–105; Poole and Rogers, *Bristol from Below*.

²⁰ HPC, 1790–1820, www.historyofparliamentonline.org/ (accessed 14 Nov. 2022), s.v. Bristol; 'Bristol', ECPPEC, <https://ecppecc.ncl.ac.uk/case-study-constituencies/bristol/> (accessed 26 Mar. 2023).

involved in the city's two political clubs and were also socially prominent among Bristol's other clubs and societies, particularly the Bristol Library Society.²¹

These structural elements of politics in Bristol, and networks of sociability and patronage were clearly important in determining electoral contests, and the Bristol Library Society, could be an important element in the creation and maintenance of such networks.²² Yet to understand fully why electors would cast their votes in a specific manner requires an appreciation of the local intellectual or ideological context. Subscription libraries contributed to this through the circulation of texts within a politically engaged and socially and economically secure population. The electoral significance of this has not been examined by either library or political historians of pre-Reform Britain. Analysis of library borrowing records and electoral polling data provides an opportunity to link together the intellectual climate in which elections took place with the act of voting itself, and to go further in our analysis of the political vitality of the unreformed political system. Bristol's size as a political constituency, the extent of its subscription library (and its surviving records), and the feverish nature of Bristol's politics in 1812, which witnessed two electoral contests, make it a prime candidate for such an analysis. Bristol Library members were directly involved in nearly all facets of Bristol's electoral activity in 1812, as candidates, canvassers, civic officials, voters and street participants. Voting data for the 1812 general election provides the opportunity to analyse the votes and political affiliations of the members of the subscription library quantitatively and to cross-reference this data with their record of reading for that year.²³ While local circumstances were a significant factor in deciding Bristol's electoral contests, the reading habits of library electors were thoroughly international. The phantom of France and the legacy of Revolutionary terror loomed large in the material borrowed from the Bristol Library and this reflected, or possibly accentuated, discourses in the election such as a customary mistrust of external political figures and an anti-Gallicism that contributed to the defeat of the insurgent Whig candidate.

Before we can proceed to an analysis of this intellectual culture, it is necessary to provide some background to both of Bristol's electoral contests of 1812 in order to understand better the context within which each election was fought and read. Bristol's oligarchical, dynastic politics was built upon a series of interwoven networks between members of different associational organisations; these included the city's two political clubs, the Tory Steadfast Society and the Whig Independent Club, as well as charitable or voluntary associations such as the Colston Society, the Society of Merchant Venturers, the Bristol Library Society and the centre of local civic governance in the corporation.²⁴ Securing the political support of the members of these sociable institutions, in addition to Bristol's large electorate,

²¹ Poole and Rogers, *Bristol from Below*, 85.

²² Skjönsberg, 'Richard Champion', 151.

²³ *The Bristol Poll-Book* (Bristol, 1818). This electoral data has been digitally transcribed: 'Oct. 1812 Bristol', ECPPEC, <https://ecppec.ncl.ac.uk/case-study-constituencies/bristol/election/Oct-1812/> (accessed 24 Mar. 2023).

²⁴ For an overview of Bristol's civic governance prior to its reform in the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act, see Graham Bush, *Bristol and its Municipal Government, 1820–1851* (Bristol, 1976), 17–28; Harrison, *Crowds and History*, 62–4. See also *Politics and the Port of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century: The Petitions of the Society of Merchant Venturers, 1698–1803*, ed. W.E. Minchinton (Bristol Record Society, xxiii, 1963), xi–xviii; Barry, 'Bristol Pride', 25–47; Steve Poole, 'To be a Bristolian: Civic Identity and the Social Order, 1750–1850', in *Making of Modern Bristol*, ed. Dresser and Ollerenshaw, 76–95; Gorsky, *Patterns of Philanthropy*; Poole and Rogers, *Bristol from Below*, 85–101.

made contested elections particularly expensive. It was for this reason that its two respective factions frequently agreed to split the representation of the city between them, as occurred between 1754 and 1774, and again between 1784 and 1812.²⁵ This infrequency of contests was a source of much discontent. It was only a challenge to the city's established political clubs that forced a ballot in March 1812, when the incumbent Tory MP, Charles Bragge (1754–1831), opted not to stand for re-election at Bristol and the Steadfast Society selected Richard Hart Davis (1766–1842), a local West India merchant and the MP for Colchester since 1807, to be his replacement.²⁶ Although the Whig club decided not to challenge for the seat of the 'Blues', Henry 'Orator' Hunt (1773–1835), active in Bristol's radical politics since 1807, was determined to force a contest. The resulting 15 days of polling in July saw an election that was 'extraordinarily violent', as Hunt's and Davis's armed supporters skirmished in the streets.²⁷ Hunt was ultimately well beaten, 1,907 votes to 235, but his chief success lay in keeping the polls open for so many days, thus gaining for himself a national platform and forcing Davis's Tories to spend over £14,000 in campaign expenses.²⁸

A further electoral contest was assured to take place at the next general election, which occurred in October that year, with Hunt again choosing to challenge Davis. Divisions between Bristol's Whigs now produced a contest for the second parliamentary seat with the resignation of the long-term incumbent, Evan Baillie (1741–1835). In December 1811, the Whig Independent Club had invited Sir Samuel Romilly (1757–1818), the prominent lawyer and legal reformer, to stand as his replacement. Romilly's candidature, and his support for the abolition of slavery, were strongly opposed by certain Whig families of the West India interest, such as the Protheroes, Ameses and the Baillies. They proposed a candidate of their own, Edward Protheroe (1774–1856), in his stead.²⁹ Although his candidacy was rejected by the Whig club, Protheroe opted to stand for election anyway, promising to be the 'enemy of tyranny and corruption whether exercised by a Court, an Aristocracy, or a Club'.³⁰

John Phillips writes that the 1812 general election illustrated the 'complex cross-currents of Whiggery in Bristol' and saw the establishment of a general pattern of Whig division that repeated itself in further electoral contests in 1818, 1820, 1826 and 1830.³¹ Much of this division owed itself to differences over the abolition of slavery, which, as a political issue, was able to cut across partisan lines and serve as a unifying force among Bristol merchants.³² There was also a great degree of political distance between the two 'Whig' candidates

²⁵ Phillips, *Great Reform Bill*, 75.

²⁶ The following account of Bristol's politics in 1812 is drawn from *Bristol Poll-Book*, i–lxiv; Brett, 'Liberal Middle Classes', 86–99; HPC, 1790–1820, s.v. Bristol; Harrison, *Crowds and History*, 209–20; Phillips, *Great Reform Bill*, 83–6; Poole and Rogers, *Bristol from Below*, 307–11.

²⁷ John Belchem, 'Orator' Hunt: Henry Hunt and English Working-Class Radicalism (2012), 26–30; Poole and Rogers, *Bristol from Below*, 307.

²⁸ Despite it being some 16 years since Bristol had last faced a contested election, and despite the length of the poll itself, the total of recorded votes represented less than half of the total electorate. This may be due to no official Whig candidate standing for election, although without a surviving poll book, it is impossible to say for sure. Violence during the period of polling may also have played a role: HPC, 1790–1820, s.v. Bristol; Harrison, *Crowds and History*, 215; Poole and Rogers, *Bristol from Below*, 308–9. Turnout was also low at the general election in October.

²⁹ Samuel Romilly, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly* (3rd edn, 2 vols, 1841), ii, 229–30.

³⁰ *Bristol Poll-Book*, xxvi.

³¹ Phillips, *Great Reform Bill*, 83.

³² John Latimer, *The Annals of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (Bristol, 1893), 476–7.

which reflected schisms within the Whig party at a local and national level. Romilly was a proud and vocal abolitionist, who was also supportive of parliamentary reform and Catholic emancipation. In contrast, Protheroe, as a banker and West India merchant, had accrued much of his wealth through his family's plantations in Jamaica, St Vincent and Trinidad, and was publicly evasive on both parliamentary reform and the repeal of penal laws against both Dissenters and Catholics.³³ A supporter of Romilly's, and a library member, described his politics as that of a 'neutral and negative whiggism': he was certainly politically closer to the Grenvillite wing of the parliamentary Whigs than its Foxite group.³⁴ Arguably, the divisions between Bristol Whigs which first arose at the election of 1812 were the same political differences that had led the Portland Whigs to join with William Pitt in 1794, and would lead William Grenville and his followers to split from Charles Grey's Whigs in 1817.³⁵ An analysis of the borrowings from the Bristol Library can help to explain why the intellectual and political climate in Bristol proved to be so unfavourable to Romilly and his politics.

The disarray within the Whig camp assured Davis's safe re-election in October 1812 and ceded a great deal of political control to Bristol's Tories, enabling them to decide to which Whig candidate they wished to lend their second votes.³⁶ On the third day of the poll, Davis and Protheroe openly united in what was akin to a joint electoral ticket.³⁷ For his part, without the institutional support of Bristol's Whig club, Protheroe was reliant upon Davis's aid to be elected. This resulted in him being mocked in satirical prints and would cause further trouble in subsequent contests.³⁸ Protheroe's politics were certainly closer to Davis's than Davis's politics were to Romilly's. Davis proudly pronounced himself a Tory who saw 'the encroaching and overbearing licence of the people' as the most prominent danger to the constitution.³⁹ Davis's and Protheroe's similar backgrounds, as West India merchants and Bristol Library members, may also have played a role.⁴⁰ Beginning on 6 October, the polling lasted for ten days. Romilly retired on the eighth day, having received 1,678 votes; Hunt received 444, with the two victorious candidates, Davis and Protheroe, receiving 2,901 and 2,432 votes respectively.⁴¹

³³Legacies of British Slavery, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/27337> (accessed 16 May 2023), s.v. Protheroe senior, Edward; Phillips, *Great Reform Bill*, 84. Hunt, in his opening address, said of Protheroe, 'that after listening to him with great attention, he could not discover what his politics were': *Bristol Poll-Book*, i.

³⁴C.A. Elton, *An Account of the Entry of Sir Samuel Romilly into Bristol* (Bristol, 1812), 28–9, quoted in Brett, 'Liberal Middle Classes', 93; *HPC, 1790–1820*, s.v. Protheroe, Edward. See also Mitchell, *The Whigs in Opposition*, 19–20, 109; Peter Jupp, *Lord Grenville, 1759–1834* (New York, 1985), 420–39.

³⁵Mitchell, *The Whigs in Opposition*, 109; J.J. Sack, *The Grenvillites, 1801–29: Party Politics and Factionalism in the Age of Pitt and Liverpool* (1979), 163–9; Frank O'Gorman, *Emergence of the British Two-Party System, 1760–1832* (1982), 21–6; Jupp, *Lord Grenville*, 443–9; W.A. Hay, *The Whig Revival, 1808–1830* (Basingstoke, 2005), 17–18.

³⁶Phillips, *Great Reform Bill*, 83.

³⁷Romilly, *Memoirs*, ii, 275.

³⁸British Museum, 1868.0808.8026, Charles Williams, 'Two candidates for the city of B—l general election Octr, 1812' (1812); Phillips, *Great Reform Bill*, 86–8.

³⁹*Parliamentary Register* (ser. 1, 41 vols, 1803–20), xxxix, 594, quoted in *HPC, 1790–1820*, s.v. Davis, Richard Hart; Phillips, *Great Reform Bill*, 85. Davis was also a vocal opponent of religious toleration, including Catholic emancipation and the abolition of slavery: Romilly, *Memoirs*, ii, 283–4.

⁴⁰Protheroe had been a library subscriber since 1802, while Davis subscribed in 1805: BA, 160, cash book, 2 Dec. 1772–24 Apr. 1871, p. 25.

⁴¹'Oct. 1812 Bristol', ECPPEC.

Bristol Library members were active participants in Bristol's electoral politics in 1812 and were well placed to affect the political climate of the city. They were directly involved in the politicking, whether as candidates (Davis and Protheroe) or as campaigners. As chair of the Steadfast Society, library committee member Thomas Daniel (1762–1854) was central to Tory electioneering efforts throughout the year and a was hugely influential figure in Bristol society.⁴² Protheroe's candidature was aided financially and logistically by his two younger brothers, Henry (1777–1840) and Philip (1779–1846), who were both library members.⁴³ Romilly received support from the alderman John Noble (d. 1828) and Charles Abraham Elton (1778–1853), a member of the mercantile gentry whom Hunt later accused as being among 'the foremost to abuse and belie me' during the October 1812 election.⁴⁴ Bristol Library members were also involved in the management and organisation of the electoral process as magistrates, sheriffs and barristers.⁴⁵ Finally, library members were also among the some 5,000 electors of Bristol who cast their votes in both July and October 1812.

In the absence of other sources, the Bristol Library's registers provide an accurate record of who could access the library in 1812. These reveal that between January and December 1812, 229 borrowers made a total of 3,097 borrowings.⁴⁶ This total offers a useful sample of names of Bristol's civic class to compare against those of voters appearing in the 1812 poll book. Using other records and biographical information it has been possible to identify 79 individuals who borrowed from the library in 1812 and who voted in the general election in October.⁴⁷ Of the 4,389 individuals who voted in the election, these 79 library electors make up just less than 2 per cent of the total Bristol electorate for 1812.⁴⁸ Without a full list of the library's members (the practice of publishing membership lists of the society was discontinued in 1798) and a full electoral roll for Bristol, it is impossible to conclusively determine how many library members were able to vote in 1812.⁴⁹ Burgess books detail

⁴²BA, SMV/8/2/2/2, White Lion committee book, 1805–26; ODNB, www.oxforddnb.com (accessed 23 Mar. 2023), s.v. Daniel, Thomas; Bush, *Bristol and its Municipal Government*, 25–6, 84; Harrison, *Crowds and History*, 81.

⁴³Romilly, *Memoirs*, ii, 230; John Latimer, *The Annals of Bristol in the Nineteenth Century* (Bristol, 1887), 52.

⁴⁴Harrison, *Crowds and History*, 72–8, 210–12. Nevertheless, Hunt would also describe Elton as being one 'of the very best men amongst the gentry of Bristol': Henry Hunt, *Memoirs of Henry Hunt* (3 vols, 1820–2), iii, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8463/pg8463.html> (accessed 28 Oct. 2023). See also *Bristol Poll-Book*, xiii; ODNB, s.v. Elton, Sir Charles Abraham. Romilly's nomination in October 1812 was seconded by Elton's father, Revd Sir Abraham Elton (1755–1842), who had served on the Library Society's committee in the 1770s: Romilly, *Memoirs*, ii, 271–2; *Bristol Poll-Book*, xxxvii–xxxix; *Minute Book*, ed. Skjönsberg and Towsey, 258.

⁴⁵These included Benjamin Bickley (1763–1846), George Hillhouse (1778–1848) and Abraham Hilhouse (1787–1867) as sheriffs, and Edmund Griffith (d. 1835) as steward of the sheriff's court: Alfred Beaven, *Bristol Lists: Municipal and Miscellaneous* (Bristol, 1899). For the electoral process in Bristol, see Harrison, *Crowds and History*, 209.

⁴⁶Borrowings for the year 1812 were recorded in two consecutive borrowing registers: BCL, B7483, f. 31, Oct. 1811–Aug. 1812; B7484, f. 32, Aug 1812–July 1813. Borrowings were recorded and tallied by title, although members were able to borrow multiple volumes at a time. There were 292 total subscribers in 1812 (not including life members who would not have paid an annual subscription), meaning that 78 per cent of the library membership were active borrowers: BA, 160.

⁴⁷These are chiefly *Minute Book*, ed. Skjönsberg and Towsey; BA, 153; BA, 32079/155, minute book of committee, 31 Mar. 1789–10 Mar. 1807; BA, 32079/156, minute book of committee, 24 Mar. 1807–22 Mar. 1823; BA, 160; *Index to the Bristol Burgess Books: Volumes 1 to 21, 1557–1995* (Bristol, 2005). For four borrowers it has been impossible to determine their identities from multiple individuals of the same name listed in the poll book and they have been excluded from the following analysis.

⁴⁸'Oct. 1812 Bristol', ECPPEC.

⁴⁹*Minute Book*, ed. Skjönsberg and Towsey, app. 2.

who may have been eligible to vote as freemen, but freeholders (worth 40 shillings or more) could also vote in Bristol's elections.⁵⁰ A significant proportion of this electorate lived beyond Bristol and would not have been eligible for library membership, which was available only to those that lived in or close to the city.⁵¹ Nor was the vote open to the library's 12 female borrowers in 1812.⁵² Although Bristol's electorate was large, by the 19th century it represented just less than a quarter of the city's wider population, or around one in five males. Moreover, increases in the size of the electorate had failed to keep pace with urban population growth meaning that, as a proportion of the wider population, the size of Bristol's electorate had declined over time.⁵³ There was a symmetry here with the Bristol Library, whose own membership, although gradually increasing until 1821, also failed to keep pace with population trends.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, this tally of 79 library electors underplays the number of those who could vote in 1812. Electoral turnout in 1812 (66 per cent) was markedly lower than it had been at elections earlier in the 18th century, and there are a number of library members who borrowed books and were eligible to vote but are not recorded as doing so.⁵⁵ Likewise, there are a number of eligible voters who are not recorded as library borrowers and either could have or did vote in October 1812.⁵⁶ Despite being a small proportion of the overall electorate, this list of 79 library electors includes individuals who would have been well known among Bristol's civic society, including Joseph Cottle (1770–1853), Thomas Daniel, John Eagles (1783–1855), Philip John Miles (1774–1845), John Noble and James Cowles Prichard (1786–1848).⁵⁷ As political campaigners, organisers and pamphlet-writers their influence went far beyond the act of voting. As a collective group, they were instrumental actors in the discourses which shaped electioneering in Bristol in 1812.⁵⁸ As borrowers, they were a representative group in terms of the number of borrowings they made and were about no more or less likely to borrow books than non-voting library members.⁵⁹ In a

⁵⁰*HPC, 1790–1820*, s.v. Bristol; Poole and Rogers, *Bristol from Below*, 92.

⁵¹See, for example, the refusal to transfer a library share to a gentleman living in Weston-super-Mare: BA, 32079/157, minute book of committee, 1 Apr. 1823–20 Dec. 1836, 15 July 1828.

⁵²These included Ann Span (1777–1844) and the inventor Sarah Guppy (d. 1852): Legacies of British Slavery, s.v. Bartlet, Ann, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/21446630841> (accessed 24 May 2023); ODNB, s.v. Guppy, Sarah.

⁵³Poole and Rogers, *Bristol from Below*, 92.

⁵⁴BA, 32079/153, pp. 90–2; BA, 160; Hapgood, *Friends to Literature*, 17–19.

⁵⁵For example, turnout in 1754 was 84 per cent: Poole and Rogers, *Bristol from Below*, 92. It is curious why Bristol's turnout in Oct. 1812 was so low considering that preparation for a general election had been underway for over a year. Although it was noisy and boisterous, there was also no repeat of the electoral violence of July: *HPC, 1790–1820*, s.v. Bristol. Library members who borrowed books and were not recorded as voters in 1812, despite being eligible, included the independent Whig candidate Edward Protheroe, along with his younger brother Philip, Evan Baillie, John Paine Berjew (1748–1833), Lowbridge Bright (1741–1818), William Gibbons (1782–1848) and Nathan Windey.

⁵⁶Even if they did not borrow books, such individuals may have used their library membership to read in the library building. These included the Tory candidate Richard Hart Davis, as well as Schaw Grossett (d. 1820), Charles Joseph Harford (1764–1830), John Peace (1785–1861) and Henry Protheroe.

⁵⁷ODNB, s.v. Cottle, Joseph and Eagles, John; *HPC, 1820–32*, s.v. Miles, Philip John; ODNB, s.v. Prichard, James Cowles.

⁵⁸For examples, see *Bristol Poll-Book*, i–lxiv; Brett, 'Liberal Middle Classes', 86–96.

⁵⁹Seventy-nine (34 per cent) elector borrowers out of a total of 229 borrowers, responsible for 1,102 (36 per cent) borrowings out of a total of 3,097.

similar manner of proportionality to Bristol's electorate and its total population, the library's electors account for just over a third of its active borrowers in 1812. This group is also generally representative of voting habits of the Bristol electorate in 1812 more widely. Votes by library electors were cast in five different ways: 43 voters voted for Davis and Protheroe; 19 'plumped' for Davis, using only one of their votes and voting for one candidate, with nine doing the same for Romilly; seven voters split for Romilly and Davis; and only a single voter ignored the Whig divide and voted for Romilly and Protheroe. There were no plumpers for Protheroe and no votes at all for Henry Hunt.

That no Bristol Library members voted for Hunt is not a complete surprise. Hunt succeeded in securing only a tenth of the votes he had achieved earlier in July and his voters were principally those involved in small crafts and trades that were not well represented among the Bristol Library's membership.⁶⁰ His standing at the general election in 1812 was partly performative, especially while the split within the Whig camp made the prospect of an electoral contest inevitable, and his polling at the July by-election demonstrated that he had little chance of success. Yet Hunt was an 'expert in the politics of exposure' and his goal at both elections in 1812 had been to extend the length of the poll, raise his public profile and expose the tactics employed by Bristol's political factions.⁶¹ Hunt's chief target in all this was the city's corporation, which was widely viewed as a symbol of corruption and remained a target of much popular loathing.⁶² Despite close links between the Bristol Library and the corporation, there were also critics of it among the library's membership, most notably the author and newspaper proprietor John Mathew Gutch (1776–1861); however, no other members wished to align themselves openly with Hunt in this cause, mindful perhaps of the social opprobrium that might come with such an association.⁶³

The voting habits of Bristol Library members roughly correspond to those of the wider electorate, except in a few key respects. Library voters were slightly more likely to vote for the two successful candidates, Davis and Protheroe, than the wider electorate (54 per cent to 48 per cent). They were also slightly less likely to plump for Romilly (12 per cent to 17 per cent).⁶⁴ These who did so included Unitarians of Lewin's Mead Chapel, Bristol's leading nonconformist centre, including its minister, Revd John Prior Estlin (1747–1817), and two influential members of its congregation, Richard Bright (1754–1840) and Charles Abraham Elton.⁶⁵ A far greater divergence in voting habits comes in the percentage of library members who plumped for Davis versus that of the wider electorate (24 per cent to 8 per cent), with far more choosing to pin their political colours firmly to the flag of the 'blue' interest.⁶⁶ In terms of electoral strategy, plumping for Davis accomplished very

⁶⁰ Poole and Rogers, *Bristol from Below*, 309–10.

⁶¹ Romilly, *Memoirs*, ii, 264; Harrison, *Crowds and History*, 213–17; Poole and Rogers, *Bristol from Below*, 310.

⁶² Gorsky, *Patterns of Philanthropy*, 64–6; Harrison, *Crowds and History*, 219; Belchem, 'Orator' Hunt, 30–1; Poole and Rogers, *Bristol from Below*, 308–10.

⁶³ *Minute Book*, ed. Skjónsberg and Towsey, xv; Hapgood, *Friends to Literature*; Bush, *Bristol and its Municipal Government*, 22–3; ODNB, s.v. Gutch, John Mathew. Following the July by-election, the Steadfast Society published the names, occupations and parishes of the 235 men who had voted for Hunt: *A List of the Persons who Voted for Mr Hunt at the Late Election* (Bristol, 1812), cited in Harrison, *Crowds and History*, 215 n. 59.

⁶⁴ Figures taken from Phillips, *Great Reform Bill*, 85–6.

⁶⁵ *The Bright–Meyler Papers: A Bristol–West India Connection, 1732–1837*, ed. Kenneth Morgan (Oxford, 2007), 122–3; ODNB, s.v. Estlin, John Prior.

⁶⁶ My calculations.

little. The divided contest between the Bristol Whigs ensured that his position was never truly threatened, and Bristol's Tories enjoyed the luxury of being able to choose whichever Whig candidate they wished to share the representation of Bristol.⁶⁷ Although Davis was politically closer to Protheroe, there were still many differences between the candidates. While Protheroe prevaricated on the issue of Catholic Emancipation and supported peace negotiations with France, Davis was staunchly anti-Catholic and supported the full prosecution of the war effort.⁶⁸ It might have been that even Protheroe's 'mild' Whig principles proved too much for those library members who identified themselves solely with the Tory interest. Certainly, members of the Tory political club, the Steadfast Society, were well-represented within the library's membership. At the Steadfast meeting held on 24 June 1812, convened to establish Davis's election committee for the July by-election, five of the 13 attendant members were also library members. This did not include other prominent Tories who were not in attendance, including Edward and Thomas Daniel, George Daubeny (1775–1851) and James Tobin (1736–1817).⁶⁹ This was a group of individuals united by their political beliefs, associational participation, merchant backgrounds and service in the corporation.⁷⁰ This contingent within the library was representative of a wider Tory dominance in Bristol's civic politics, which became more pronounced in 1812 when the party secured a majority membership within the corporation.⁷¹ Indeed, it was two library members who were instrumental in this development, when the shipbuilding brothers George and Abraham Hilhouse were appointed in 1812.⁷²

Recognising this political complexion of the library is significant not only for our understanding of where the library was situated within Bristol's political spectrum, but also for how the library collection was used by its members. Though non-partisan, the Bristol Library was not an ideologically or a politically neutral borrowing space, and this reading context shaped how individuals used the subscription library, the intellectual and ideological significance of borrowing from the Bristol Library and the political texts within it. The Bristol Library was not the only source of reading material available to electors in 1812, even if studies of comparative urban readers suggest they were more likely to get most of their reading material from subscription libraries.⁷³ Bristol was home to a number of different library types, including circulating, scientific and medical libraries.⁷⁴ It also had a lively newspaper culture, with publications of various political shades.⁷⁵ Electors may also

⁶⁷Nearly 90 per cent of Protheroe's votes were doubled with a vote to Davis: Phillips, *Great Reform Bill*, 86.

⁶⁸Phillips, *Great Reform Bill*, 85; HPC, 1790–1820, s.v. Protheroe, Edward and Davis, Richard Hart.

⁶⁹Those library members present included Thomas Cole, Thomas Eagles (1746–1812), Gabriel Goldney (1766–1837), Charles Ridout (d.1815) and Richard Vaughan (1767–1833): BA, SMV/8/2/2/2, 50. There were at least 32 library members in the Steadfast Society during the 18th century: *Minute Book*, ed. Skjönsberg and Towsey, xxxvi.

⁷⁰Harrison, *Crowds and History*, 78–82.

⁷¹Harrison, *Crowds and History*, 64; Brett, 'Liberal Middle Classes', 94.

⁷²Latimer, *Bristol in the Nineteenth Century*, 37; Bush, *Bristol and its Municipal Government*, 34.

⁷³Colclough, *Consuming Texts*, 98.

⁷⁴This information is taken from Robin Alston's 'The Library History Database: British Isles to 1850', currently held offline by the Institute of English Studies, University of London. It can be accessed via the Wayback Machine at <https://web.archive.org/web/20090523101524/http://www.r-alston.co.uk/library.htm> (accessed 20 Jan. 2023).

⁷⁵Phillips, *Great Reform Bill*, 87; Brett, 'Liberal Middle Classes', 142–7; Keisuke Masaki, 'The Development of Provincial Toryism in the British Urban Context, c.1815–1832', University of Edinburgh PhD, 2016, pp. 24–78.

have read books from their own libraries or read texts in situ, either in the open street, a shop window, a public space as a pasted flyer, or via a shared pamphlet. Elections were, of course, a prime theatre for the creation of political reading material and its dissemination to those who did and did not have the right to vote.⁷⁶

The social, cultural and structural dynamics of the Bristol Library Society also shaped the ways that its collection was used by Bristolians and may have influenced their voting behaviour and the wider intellectual climate. Just as a back catalogue of an individual's reading and their ideological frameworks (their social, political and religious beliefs) shaped the way they interacted with a new book, so too did the associational context from which a book was borrowed speak to the reading experience.⁷⁷ Moreover, the arrangement of books in the library, into class and subject headings, acted as both an aid to reading and a shaper of reading practices in shepherding readers towards similar material.⁷⁸ This, coupled with the acquisition practices of the Bristol Library, under the careful management of the elected committee, was designed to foster a space and collection of books for polite, cultured education that was worthy of the city's urban elite.⁷⁹ This was not intended to be a narrow, prejudiced or partisan type of learning. On political topics the library sought to purchase a range of literature which, by 1812, still included many works that were a legacy of the 'pamphlet wars' of the 1790s, including works by Edmund Burke, John Bowles, John Gifford and Arthur Young, but also by Joseph Priestley, Mary Wollstonecraft and Daniel Stuart.⁸⁰ This afforded Bristol readers a great degree of choice, but the structures within the library would have been significant in shaping reading patterns. For example, filed under 'Metaphysic, Ethic, and Logic', Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) was kept both intellectually and physically separate from other political works, being stored in a different press within the library, away from the political pamphlets.⁸¹ It is important to recognise the potential of these influences upon borrowing and reading habits, and in turn upon voting habits and the intellectual climate in which the contest was fought.

In addition to its broad range of pamphlets from the 1790s, the Bristol Library seems to have never undergone a political 'purge' of books as may have occurred elsewhere.⁸²

⁷⁶Harrison, *Crowds and History*, 211.

⁷⁷Christy Lindsay, 'Reading Associations in England and Scotland, c.1760–1830', University of Oxford DPhil, 2016, 20–2. This method, alive to the significance of the associational context to the reading of a text, builds upon the methods of reader-reception theorists, particularly Wolfgang Iser's 'horizon of expectations': Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1980). In a similar method, though principally examining the circulating library and the private library, James Raven argues that by 'recovering a sense of the internal arrangements of these libraries, we gain more clues about the cultural significance of reading': James Raven, 'From Promotion to Proscription: Arrangements for Reading and Eighteenth-Century Libraries', in *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, ed. James Raven, Helen Small and Naomie Tadmor (Cambridge, 1996), 196.

⁷⁸The annotated 1798 catalogue of the Bristol librarian John Peace includes a diagram of one of the inner rooms of the library, with the books arranged into 26 presses and six subjects: BCL, B8453.

⁷⁹*Minute Book*, ed. Skjönsberg and Towsey, xxvi–xxx.

⁸⁰*Catalogue* (1814). For more on this debate and its pamphlets, see Emma Macleod, *A War of Ideas: British Attitudes to the Wars Against Revolutionary France, 1792–1802* (Oxford, 1998).

⁸¹*Catalogue* (1814). A work could be filed under multiple headings, although only in the case of large multi-volume works.

⁸²See, for example, John Galt's description of the removal of the works of 'tainted authors' from the library at Greenock: John Galt, *Autobiography* (2 vols, 1833), i, 38–43. For further examples, see Manley, *Books, Borrowers, and Shareholders*, 100–2; K.A. Manley, 'Infidel Books and "Factories of the Enlightenment": Censorship and

Indeed, these instances have led some reading scholars to conclude that certain years saw a major reordering in subscription library collections as anti-Jacobin invective succeeded in engendering the removal of suspect texts from library shelves.⁸³ Despite a large contingent of Bristol's Tories among its membership, and despite being headed by a cautious and conservative vice-president in Samuel Seyer (1757–1831), no authors were blacklisted from the Bristol Library Society, nor were any works removed from circulation for political motives.⁸⁴ The library even stocked the work of the arch-Jacobin himself, Thomas Paine, having both parts of his attack upon institutional religion in *Age of Reason* (1796). These had been purchased at a committee meeting on 18 October 1796.⁸⁵

For a library user in 1812, somewhat chronologically distanced from the 'pamphlet wars' of the 1790s, this literature and these authors might have lost some of their political charge. Certainly, few of these works were being regularly taken out of the library in 1812, with library members instead preferring newer publications. Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* was borrowed by one voter in 1812, John Brent Cross, on 27 November.⁸⁶ Cross was an apothecary on Dove Street and had close connections to members of Bristol's medical community and others interested in it, including James Cowles Prichard, Richard Smith (1772–1843), George Fisher (d. 1821) and James Storr Fry (1767–1835), all of whom were library members.⁸⁷ The borrowing register shows that Cross borrowed *Rights of Woman* for almost a full month and read it alongside Walter Scott's *Marmion* (1808) and *Lady of the Lake* (1810), Elizabeth Hamilton's *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796), and the 4th earl of Chesterfield's *Works* (1777–78) and *Letters to his Son* (1774).⁸⁸

Cross's reading was varied and, as it came after the general election, could not have swayed his choice of vote which, like the majority of library electors, was for Davis and Protheroe.⁸⁹ His borrowing of a politically contentious text comes seemingly at odds with his own political views.⁹⁰ It may be that he read *Rights of Woman* for a practical purpose,

Surveillance in Subscription and Circulating Libraries in an Age of Revolutions, 1790–1850', *Book History*, xix (2017), 171; Loveday Herridge and Sue Roe, 'Reading Sheffield: Sheffield Libraries and Book Clubs, 1771–1850', in *Before the Public Library: Reading, Community, and Identity in the Atlantic World, 1650–1850*, ed. Mark Towsey and K.B. Roberts (Leiden, 2017), 187; *A Country Carpenter's Confession of Faith* (1794), cited in St Clair, *The Reading Nation*, 257.

⁸³William St Clair dates this as 1794, with Stephen Colclough and others suggesting 1798 as significant: St Clair, *The Reading Nation*, 257; Richard Cronin, *The Politics of Romantic Poetry: In Search of the Pure Commonwealth* (Basingstoke, 2000), 61–82, cited in Colclough, *Consuming Texts*, 110–11; H.J. Jackson, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (New Haven, 2001), 78; Andrews, *British Periodical Press*, 72–82.

⁸⁴For an exemplar of Seyer's politics, see his description of the political situation of Bristol in Nov. 1820: BA, 44954/1/1, calendar of events in Bristol, 1820–27, 28–9.

⁸⁵*A Catalogue of the Books belonging to the Bristol Library Society* (Bristol, 1798); *Minute Book*, ed. Skjónsborg and Towsey, 213. However, Paine's work is not listed in later catalogues published in 1814 and 1834.

⁸⁶BCL, B7484.

⁸⁷'Oct 1812 Bristol', ECPPEC; Michael Whitfield, *The Dispensaries: Healthcare for the Poor before the NHS* (Bloomington, 2016).

⁸⁸BCL, B7484.

⁸⁹'Oct 1812 Bristol', ECPPEC.

⁹⁰In 1818 and 1830, Cross voted for the candidates proposed by Bristol's Tory and Whig clubs, while in 1835 he was listed as a Conservative candidate to be city alderman. 'June 1818 Bristol', ECPPEC, <https://ecppeec.ncl.ac.uk/case-study-constituencies/bristol/election/June-1818/> (accessed 26 Mar. 2023); 'Aug 1830 Bristol', ECPPEC, <https://ecppeec.ncl.ac.uk/case-study-constituencies/bristol/election/Aug-1830/> (accessed 26 Mar. 2023); Beaven, *Bristol Lists*, 42.

and for its insights on female education. In this regard, his borrowing of Chesterfield's *Letters to his Son* two days before he chose to return Wollstonecraft may be significant. In another respect, Cross's reading of Elizabeth Hamilton's two novels, *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800) and *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*, which bookended his borrowing record for 1812, may have encouraged him to seek out a work of 'modern philosophy' himself.⁹¹ Perhaps his reading of Hamilton's anti-Jacobin critique furthered his own disparagement of Wollstonecraft's text.⁹² As it did for others, this kind of reading could have reaffirmed Cross's sense of identity, enabling him to situate better his political views or provide him with the means to better develop them.⁹³ The associational context in which Cross borrowed these texts would also have been significant among fellows of similar politics within an association which stressed order and process.⁹⁴ Without library or reading records, and barring the survival of other sources, the individual idiosyncrasies which determined both reading or voting habits remain intangibly distant. Even with these borrowing records, it is difficult to say whether either the act of reading or voting pre-empted the other. Yet it does point to a potential motivator for electoral behaviour, in this case an anti-Jacobin strand in Bristol's politics in 1812, that would otherwise be left unknown. Moreover, this is an analysis which can be undertaken at both a qualitative and quantitative level, with the latter further contextualising the social and intellectual setting within which this electoral contest was decided.

The 1812 election saw in Romilly an external political figure vying to be chosen as Bristol's parliamentary representative. In 1774, when Edmund Burke had stood for election in the city, he and his supporters had gone to great efforts to interact with its social and cultural networks, and Burke himself had joined the Library Society as a life member and had donated several books to it.⁹⁵ Romilly made no such similar attempts.⁹⁶ No doubt, the width in political views between Romilly and some of Bristol's conservative Whigs was significant, but just as significant may have been a bibliographical climate of anti-Gallicism which made Bristol an unfavourable constituency for a man of his political views and heritage.

In 1812, voters made a total of 1,102 borrowings from the Bristol Library, which were representative of the general borrowing trends of the wider library membership.⁹⁷ 'Travel' was far and away the most popular borrowed subject, accounting for 21 per cent and 22

⁹¹ Cross borrowed Hamilton's *Memoirs* on 14 Jan. 1812: BCL, B7484.

⁹² It may be significant that he chose to return both *Rights of Woman* and the first volume of *Hindoo Rajah* on the same day (26 Dec. 1812): BCL, B7484.

⁹³ Bebbington, *Mind of Gladstone*, 15–40; Windscheffel, *Reading Gladstone*, 234–9; Towsey, *Reading History*, 63–5; Lamond, 'Representative Readers', 225–7.

⁹⁴ Allan, *Nation of Readers*, 75, 106–7; David Allan, 'Politeness and the Politics of Culture: An Intellectual History of the Eighteenth-Century Subscription Library', *Library & Information History*, xxix (2013), 159–69.

⁹⁵ Skjönsberg, 'Richard Champion', 149–58; *Minute Book*, ed. Skjönsberg and Towsey, xxxv–xxxvi.

⁹⁶ Poole and Rogers, *Bristol from Below*, 309.

⁹⁷ BCL, B7483 and B7484. To enable an analysis of library borrowing by subject, each borrowed text was given one of eighteen different subject categories (belles lettres; drama; education; fiction; fine arts; history; law; lives; medicine; natural philosophy; periodicals; philosophy & morality; poetry; politics, society & political economy; practical arts/useful knowledge; theology and travel). These subject categories were jointly formulated by the projects 'Books and Borrowing, 1750–1830: An Analysis of Scottish Borrowers' Registers' (<https://borrowing.stir.ac.uk/>) and 'Libraries, Reading Communities & Cultural Formation in the 18th-Century Atlantic' (www.liverpool.ac.uk/history/research/research-projects/history-libraries/).

per cent of total borrowings by all library members and library electors respectively. Indeed, for library members and library electors, the four most popular borrowed subjects (travel, history, periodicals and lives) accounted for 54 per cent of all borrowings made.⁹⁸ The popularity of travel writing was not a trend restricted to Bristol; records from comparative libraries elsewhere in the British Isles suggest that it was generally popular.⁹⁹ No doubt, travel writing's popularity as a library borrowing came in part from the broad category of works it could encompass.¹⁰⁰ Yet the most popular borrowed political works also had an international, outward-looking dimension and a fixation with French domestic politics. The works of political and social theorists were borrowed by voters, including works by Voltaire, Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, Richard Price, Thomas Malthus and Mary Wollstonecraft, but not in large numbers. Instead, library electors were more likely to take out a work such as Joseph Weber's *Memoirs of Marie Antoinetta* (1805–12), edited by the leading anti-Jacobin, Robert Charles Dallas, which included an analysis of *Several Important Periods of the French Revolution*. Of almost equal popularity was Theodor von Faber's translated *Sketches of the Internal State of France* (1811), which was widely reported as having been suppressed by Napoleon in Europe.¹⁰¹ Not all works offered a negative depiction of Napoleonic France, however. Anne Plumptre's *Narrative of a Three Years' Residence in France* (1810) was both a work of travel writing and political 'polemic', providing a first-hand account of Napoleon's reign, recognising his legitimacy to rule and advocating peace with him.¹⁰² Yet Plumptre's narrative was swimming against the political and bibliographic tide among the Bristol Library's borrowers. Indeed, anti-Jacobin and anti-Gallic sentiment crossed over into other seemingly apolitical subject categories. The most popular novelist for library electors in 1812 was Elizabeth Hamilton, with her *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* and *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* being borrowed a total of 11 times. In both, Hamilton set her sights against the levelling tendency of French principles, as well as the 'new philosophy' of British writers such as Wollstonecraft, William Godwin and Mary Hays.¹⁰³

French domestic politics, even events occurring some two decades earlier, continued to appear prominently in the reading material of Bristol readers in 1812. The resultant anxiety from such a reading syllabus would have been heightened by a number of features of the October general election. As had been the case in 1774, a competitive contest in the city had been forced by an outsider standing for election. The violence and disorder that had

⁹⁸The top four most popular borrowed subjects for all library members: travel, 650 (21 per cent of total); history, 372 (12 per cent); lives, 342 (11 per cent); periodicals, 314 (10 per cent). For library electors: travel, 247 (22 per cent); history, 121 (11 per cent); periodicals, 119 (11 per cent); lives, 109 (10 per cent).

⁹⁹'Travel' was as popular at subscription libraries in Scotland, including the Leighton Library and the Wigtown Subscription Library. Borrowing records from both, in addition to 16 other historic libraries in Scotland, will be published as part of the 'Books and Borrowing' project. Paul Kaufman's analysis of borrowings from the Bristol Library in the 18th century also found 'travel' to be the most popular subject: Paul Kaufman, 'Some Reading Trends in Bristol 1773–84', in Paul Kaufman, *Libraries and Their Users: Collected Papers in Library History* (1969), 31.

¹⁰⁰Nigel Leask, 'Eighteenth-Century Travel Writing', in *The Cambridge History of Travel Writing*, ed. Nandini Das and Tim Youngs (Cambridge, 2019), 93–107; Nigel Leask, *Stepping Westward: Writing the Highland Tour c. 1720–1830* (Oxford, 2020), 7–11; Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing: The New Critical Idiom* (2011), 44–52.

¹⁰¹Theodor von Faber, *Sketches of the Internal State of France* (1811), v–vi; *British Critic*, xxxviii (July 1811), 59–60; *Critical Review*, 3rd ser., xxiii (August 1811), 403–4.

¹⁰²Adriana Craciun, *British Women Writers and the French Revolution: Citizens of the World* (Basingstoke, 2005), 179–83.

¹⁰³Grenby, *Anti-Jacobin Novel*, 69–99.

accompanied the July by-election typified the dangers of electioneering in a city which had forgotten the conventions and structures which managed electoral proceedings.¹⁰⁴ Its results showed that Hunt had little chance of electoral success, but Romilly, backed by the Whig club, was a serious electoral prospect.¹⁰⁵ His political views, support for parliamentary reform, for religious toleration and, above all, for the abolition of slavery, placed him at odds with many of Bristol's merchant dynasties and raised the resultant electoral stakes yet further.¹⁰⁶ His candidature had already proven deeply divisive, forcing a conclusive split within the city's Whig faction that would not be fully healed until 1833.¹⁰⁷ Romilly blamed his defeat on the union of Davis and Protheroe against him, but Henry Hunt considered him to have been failed by his public supporters: 'The fact was, that these hypocritical Whigs would rather have sacrificed Romilly a hundred times, and have elected the devil himself, than they would have voted for Hunt'.¹⁰⁸ Hunt was overstating his chances of success, but to many political commentators, Romilly and his views were dangerous and foreign.

Writing after the conclusion of the contest, Robert Southey, a former resident of Bristol and a library member himself, warmly welcomed Romilly's defeat.¹⁰⁹ Despite not even knowing the names of the successful candidates, Southey considered Romilly's character, as a 'philosophical lawyer', to be cheap and his politics to be dangerous, based upon 'pseudo-philosophy' rather than on any rational judgement of man and society. Taken together, these 'would assuredly tend to make this country a province of France'.¹¹⁰ Romilly's Huguenot ancestry gave this latter remark a slight xenophobic barb and his family heritage was continually referenced, particularly by his Whig opponents, to stress his status as an outsider, not only to Bristol's politics but England more generally.¹¹¹ Romilly sought to tackle from the outset the claim that Bristol was set to elect a 'foreigner' to represent it in parliament by stressing his own Englishness in a speech he made during his first arrival into the city in April 1812.¹¹² Nevertheless, references continued to be made to his French roots in comparison to the local connections of his opponent. At a political dinner attended by Protheroe, toasts were made to 'A natural *Bristol* whig, and may it never be scratched by *London* or *French* fashions'.¹¹³ The same allusion was drawn by Henry Protheroe, albeit in a less than subtle manner, when, during the course of the election, he frequented public houses,

¹⁰⁴Harrison, *Crowds and History*, 218–19.

¹⁰⁵*HPC, 1790–1820*, s.v. Bristol; Poole and Rogers, *Bristol from Below*, 309–10.

¹⁰⁶Phillips credits the issue of slavery with the realignment of Whig identity in Bristol away from party labels after 1826: Phillips, *Great Reform Bill*, 90–4. Arguably, however, it was largely a solidification of trends that were first openly raised in 1812.

¹⁰⁷Phillips, *Great Reform Bill*, 93.

¹⁰⁸Romilly, *Memoirs*, ii, 275–82; Hunt, *Memoirs*, iii.

¹⁰⁹Southey was writing to the wine merchant Charles Danvers (c.1764–1814), who was himself a library member and borrower in 1812. For more on Southey's membership of the Bristol Library, see *Minute Book*, ed. Skjönsberg and Towsey, xlvi.

¹¹⁰'The Collected Letters of Robert Southey: Part Four: 1810–1815', ed. Ian Packer and Lynda Pratt (2013), http://romantic-circles.org/editions/southey_letters/Part_Four/HTML/letterEEd.26.2165.html#back6 (accessed 23 Mar. 2023).

¹¹¹ODNB, s.v. Romilly, Sir Samuel; Brett, 'Liberal Middle Classes', 94.

¹¹²*Bristol Poll-Book*, xxi.

¹¹³C.H. Walker, *An Independent Address to the Electors of Bristol* (Bristol, 1812), 11–12, quoted in Brett, 'Liberal Middle Classes', 94 (emphasis in original).

scattering money and vocally damning ‘French principles’.¹¹⁴ A general anti-Gallicism played a role in accentuating political differences between Whig candidates in Bristol in 1812, with Protheroe able to stress his occupation as a merchant and his participation within the political and social networks of the city, including the corporation and the Library Society, to his advantage. The borrowing records of the Library Society also demonstrate that library electors were reading a selection of works that were anti-Gallic in either their tone or analysis. Whether these reading trends were directly influential in determining voting trends is another matter. Yet the popularity of anti-Gallican texts throughout 1812 at least implies that this general milieu preceded the elections of that year, rather than resulting from them. It also demonstrates the persistence of anti-Jacobin lines of argument in the reading literature and political contests of the 1810s and beyond.¹¹⁵ Critically, as only an analysis of quantitative reading records can show, this literature, and its arguments, were making their way directly to voters through the managed and ordered medium of the subscription library.

Combining an analysis of library records with traditional political sources opens up new avenues for research into the cultural and intellectual climate of the unreformed political system. Recent digital humanities projects, whether concerned with 18th-century voters or readers, that make data available and cross-searchable will enable researchers to more easily undertake this cross-analysis of different data sets.¹¹⁶ In turn, this will allow political historians to go further in their examination of the overall vitality and the independence of electors in the unreformed electorate by using reading records to examine the local intellectual climate in which political allegiances were forged and votes were cast. The application of this methodology for the study of Bristol in 1812 sheds new light upon the cross-currents of local and national politics at play in the city which had lasting legacies on its electoral politics. While the Bristol Library was not a decisive player in the city’s politics, both the library and its members were deeply integrated within the social and political networks that decided elections. The library’s membership in 1812 reflected the political complexion of the city as it would remain for the next three decades, with the Tory club maintaining near hegemonic political control.¹¹⁷ Coinciding with this, and representative of the reading material chosen by Bristol’s library electors in 1812, was a political climate that was insular and anti-Gallican, and that made Bristol an unfavourable environment for reformist and radical politics.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴Latimer, *Bristol in the Nineteenth Century*, 52.

¹¹⁵See, for example, the opposition to the ‘egalitarian school’ in a political essay written by William Gladstone at Oxford in 1831: Bebbington, *Mind of Gladstone*, 15–x27.

¹¹⁶Examples include ECPPEC, ‘Books and Borrowing’, and ‘Libraries, Reading Communities & Cultural Formation’.

¹¹⁷Phillips, *Great Reform Bill*, 73–83; Brett, ‘Liberal Middle Classes’, 84–5.

¹¹⁸Harrison, *Crowds and History*, 240; Poole and Rogers, *Bristol from Below*, 1.