

## Chapter 20

### Book Use and Sociability in Lost Libraries of the Eighteenth Century: Towards a Union

#### Catalogue

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The conventional assumption today is that libraries exist primarily as a service to provide books; libraries have come to be valued as a fundamental plank of western, liberal democracy, and as a key element of a universal education. What we tend to forget is that the public library as social service is a very young idea; in Britain, it emerged with the Public Libraries Act of 1850, which established the principle of free public libraries supported by the taxpayer for the very first time.<sup>1</sup> Although take up was slow and uneven thereafter, the new breed of Public Library helped to displace a flourishing unregulated library culture underpinned by commercialism, voluntarism, philanthropy, association and mutual self-improvement which is now almost entirely lost from the social landscape.<sup>2</sup>

In the two centuries before the passage of the Public Libraries Act, libraries proliferated across the Anglophone world on a bewildering variety of organizational models. Libraries emerged to serve particular communities, reflecting the specialist demands of military garrisons, emigrant vessels, prisons, schools, churches, factories and informal networks of medical men and lawyers.<sup>3</sup> Libraries were part of the newly emerging 'leisure industry', with

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<sup>1</sup> For an American perspective, see Wayne Wiegand, *Part of Our Lives: A People's History of the American Public Library* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> David Allan, *A Nation of Readers: The Lending Library in Georgian England, c.1720-c.1830* (London: The British Library, 2008), pp. 109-110; Alistair Black, Simon Pepper and Kaye Bagshaw, *Books, Buildings and Social Engineering: Early Public Libraries in Britain from Past to Present* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 29. For a list of surviving independent libraries, see the Association of Independent Libraries website at <[www.independentlibraries.co.uk](http://www.independentlibraries.co.uk)> (accessed 24 March 2015).

<sup>3</sup> The pioneering account of this library culture is Paul Kaufman, *Libraries and their Users: Collected Papers in Library History* (London: Library Association, 1969). More recent studies of specialist community libraries include Bill Bell, 'Print Culture in Exile: the Scottish Emigrant Reader in the Nineteenth Century', *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada*, 36.2 (1998), pp. 87-106; Sharon Murphy, 'Imperial Reading? The East India Company's Lending Libraries for Soldiers, c.1819-1834', *Book History*, 12 (2009), pp. 74-99; Sally Hadden, 'Lawyers' Communal Subscription Libraries in Boston, Philadelphia and Charleston', given at the AHRC-funded 'Libraries in the Atlantic World' colloquium at the University of Liverpool (January, 2014); Rebecca Bowd, 'Useful Knowledge or Polite

books available for hire from small-scale operators in inns, taverns, banks, railway stations and coffee houses, and from sprawling city circulating libraries associated with the rise of the novel.<sup>4</sup> The voluntary subscription libraries, book clubs and literary societies collected books within an associational context of conversation, debate and sociability, and made a key contribution to the dissemination and widespread adoption of new cultural, scientific and political ideas.<sup>5</sup>

None of these libraries were ‘public’ in the modern sense, supported by the taxpayer and lending books free of charge to the whole community – although a handful of philanthropic foundations did allow use of books free of charge, including Chetham’s Library in Manchester, Marsh’s Library in Dublin, Gray’s Library in Haddington and the Innerpeffray Library in rural Perthshire.<sup>6</sup> Rather, scholars consider them to have played a crucial part in the emergence of an Enlightened ‘public sphere’, providing “a space where civic, religious, and commercial values converged and overlapped” for the improvement of the local community.<sup>7</sup> Joanna Innes suggests that “a leitmotif” emerged in this period that “libraries had a *public* function”, with “their mission to serve variously conceived publics”.<sup>8</sup> At Kirkcudbright, for instance, the local worthies who gathered together in 1770 to found a library by subscription “unanimously agree[d] that a Public Library, established at this place upon a proper foundation and under proper regulations, will be attended with great

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Learning? A Reappraisal of Approaches to Subscription Library History’, *Library & Information History*, 29.3 (August 2013), pp. 182-195.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Colclough, *Consuming Texts: Readers and Reading Communities, 1695-1870* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 93; Keith A. Manley, ‘Booksellers, Peruke-makers, and Rabbit Merchants: the Growth of Circulating Libraries in the Eighteenth Century’, in Robin Myers, Michael Harris and Giles Mandelbrote (eds.), *Libraries and the Book Trade* (Newcastle, De.: Oak Knoll Press, 2000), pp. 39-51.

<sup>5</sup> Allan, *Nation of Readers*; David Allan, ‘Eighteenth-Century Private Subscription Libraries and Provincial Urban Culture: The Amicable Society of Lancaster, 1769–c.1820’, *Library History*, 19.1 (2001), pp. 57-76; James Raven, ‘Libraries for Sociability: The Advance of the Subscription Library’, in Giles Mandelbrote and Keith A. Manley (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland, Volume II 1640-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 239-263; James Raven, *London Booksellers and American Customers: Transatlantic Literary Community and the Charleston Library Society, 1748-1811* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Muriel McCarthy, *All Graduates & Gentlemen: Marsh’s Library* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1980); Matthew Yeo, *The Acquisition of Books by Chetham’s Library, 1655-1700* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Vivienne S. Dunstan, ‘Glimpses into a Town’s Reading Habits in Enlightenment Scotland: Analysing the Borrowings of Gray Library, Haddington, 1732-1816’, *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, 26 (2006), pp. 42-59; Mark Towsey, *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment: Books and their Readers in Provincial Scotland, 1750-1820* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 121-159.

<sup>7</sup> Ross W. Beales and James N. Green, ‘Libraries and their Users’, in Hugh Amory and David D. Hall (eds.), *A History of the Book in America, Vol. 1: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 399-404, at p. 400.

<sup>8</sup> Joanna Innes, ‘Libraries in Context: Social, Cultural and Intellectual Background’, in Mandelbrote and Manley (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland*, pp. 285-300, at p. 285.

improvement as well as entertainment”;<sup>9</sup> members of the Library Company of Philadelphia wrote as early as 1732 that their collection would address the government’s failure to provide for “public Education”.<sup>10</sup> A number of library communities even elected to inscribe their ‘public’ character in the names they choose for their library, including the Norwich Public Library (founded in 1784), the Bolton Public Library (around 1790), the Dundee Public Library (1796) and the short-lived Bath Public Library (1801).<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, this lost library culture remained socially exclusive, and at every level users required some form of material, social or religious capital to access the books. To own books required significant capital investment, of course, and although book owners tended to be quite liberal in loaning books to friends, neighbours, business associates and even local tradesmen, artisans, shepherds and estate workers, such library access depended on the generosity, trust and patronage of library owners.<sup>12</sup> In the commercial circulating libraries that became an increasingly ubiquitous feature of British urban development in the late eighteenth century, borrowers paid a fee to take out books, while the associational book clubs, reading societies and subscription libraries levied charges for membership that were generally quite prohibitive. These charges sometimes operated alongside strict entrance criteria enforced by the routine ‘black-balling’ of undesirable prospective members in a deliberate attempt to maintain exclusivity, allowing local elites to use subscription libraries to exercise cultural leadership.<sup>13</sup> And while efforts intensified to provide libraries for ordinary readers – meeting a demand for mutual self-improvement pioneered in working-class book clubs and mechanics institutes that was later formalised in the Public Libraries movement – these efforts were sometimes driven by social elites, who strove to control not only the range of books that would be made available to the lower orders, but also the

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<sup>9</sup> Hornel Library, Broughton House, Kirkcudbright MS4/26, Minute Book of the Kirkcudbright Subscription Library, 1 May 1770; see Towsey, *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment*, pp. 56-57, 63-65.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Raven, *London Booksellers*, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Robin Alston, ‘The Library History Database: British Isles to 1850’, <[www.r-alston.co.uk/contents.htm](http://www.r-alston.co.uk/contents.htm)> (accessed March 2008); the database is presently off-line at the Institute of English Studies, London.

<sup>12</sup> Allan, *Nation of Readers*, pp.212-14; Mark Towsey, “‘The Talent hid in a Napkin’: Castle Libraries in Scotland, 1770-1830’, in Katie Halsey and W. R. Owens (eds.), *The History of Reading, Vol. 2: Evidence from the British Isles, c.1750-1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 15-31; Mark Towsey, “‘I can’t resist sending you the book’: Book Lending, Elite Women and Shared Reading Practices in Georgian Scotland’, *Library & Information History*, 29.3 (2013), pp. 210-222.

<sup>13</sup> Allan, *Nation of Readers*, pp. 64-84; Keith A. Manley, *Books, Borrowers, and Shareholders. Scottish Circulating and Subscription Libraries before 1825: A Survey and Listing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Bibliographical Society in association with the National Library of Scotland, 2012), pp. 36-45; Raven, *London Booksellers*, pp. 37-52, 67-83, 227.

conditions in which those books would be read.<sup>14</sup> The Liverpool Mechanics and Apprentices Library, for instance, was founded by well-to-do publisher and philanthropist Egerton Smith and other members of the self-defined “intelligent community” to provide books for “those classes of society, whose pecuniary means are circumscribed”. Smith’s express hope was

that an increase of knowledge, afforded to them by providing access to instructive books would render them more valuable as tradesmen and members of society; that infusing them with a taste for the rich stores of science and morality would withdraw them, at their hours of leisure, from the dangerous relaxations of a large town.<sup>15</sup>

If the lost library culture that flourished before the Public Libraries Act of 1850 sometimes acted to reinforce existing social hierarchies, it has thereby taken scholars well beyond questions about the functional provision of books to consider a much wider range of issues concerning the social, political and cultural meanings of library communities – and the lost environments within which books were encountered and used before the passage of the Public Libraries Act.

It is these issues – along with fundamental questions about the circulation and reception of books made possible by historic libraries – that has occupied the AHRC-funded international research network, ‘Community Libraries: Connecting Readers in the Atlantic World, c.1650-c.1850’. This chapter reports on the activities of the network, which aims to transform our understanding of the lost library culture of the long eighteenth century.<sup>16</sup> In particular, the network brings together scholars from literature, history, library and information science, digital humanities, computing and other cognate disciplines to explore new digital means of exploiting the interpretive potential of historical bibliometric data

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<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Steven Shapin and Barry Barnes, ‘Science, Nature and Control: Interpreting Mechanics’ Institutes’, *Social Studies of Science*, 7.1 (1977), pp. 31-74. For examples of library culture instigated and exploited by the literate working classes themselves, see Peter Hoare, ‘The Operatives’ Libraries of Nottingham: A Radical Community’s Own Initiative’, *Library History*, 19.3 (2003), pp. 173-184; John C. Crawford, ‘The Ideology of Mutual Improvement in Scottish Working Class Libraries’, *Library History*, 12 (1996), pp. 49-61; John C. Crawford, “‘The High State of Culture to which this Part of the Country has Attained’: Libraries, Reading, and Society in Paisley, 1760-1830’, *Library & Information History*, 30.3 (August 2014), pp. 172-194.

<sup>15</sup> *An Account of the Liverpool Mechanics and Apprentices Library* (Liverpool: Rushton and Melling on behalf of the Committee of the Institution, 1824), pp. 3-5.

<sup>16</sup> For an archive of the network’s activities, a full list of participants, and other resources, see <[www.communitylibraries.net](http://www.communitylibraries.net)> (all websites accessed March 2015 unless stated otherwise).

contained in library records, including circulation records, catalogues and subscription lists.<sup>17</sup> When considered collectively, surviving library records open up unparalleled opportunities for comparative quantitative analysis of book distribution and circulation in the past, alongside qualitative insights into the wider cultural practices and values that were pursued through libraries of various kinds. To illustrate the potential of this approach, the chapter analyses bibliometric data recovered from a modest subscription library founded in provincial Scotland in the 1790s, before reflecting more broadly on the network's plans to develop a 'Union Catalogue' of library records in the long eighteenth century.

### *The Community Libraries network*

The *Community Libraries* network has three principal priorities, each of which was defined and scoped out in a separate colloquium held between January 2014 and January 2015. The first priority was to reflect on the emergence of libraries in comparative perspective.<sup>18</sup> Library history, as with the wider history of books, has tended to be studied within narrowly defined national boundaries. Much of this work has been hugely helpful in establishing patterns of development on a local and national basis, as witnessed particularly in the monumental *Cambridge History of Libraries in Great Britain and Ireland*, but we have yet to see much sustained effort to trace the transnational and comparative history of libraries across different national and linguistic areas. The field remains wedded to the micro-historical case study, reluctant to look beyond the local;<sup>19</sup> it has produced relatively few dedicated research monographs, and only one book-length study of transatlantic library culture.<sup>20</sup>

This is problematic because formal library culture does not seem to have originated in the metropolis, emerging instead in colonial America and spreading from there to some of the more peripheral parts of the British Isles. The first British subscription library was actually Benjamin Franklin's Library Company of Philadelphia in 1731, while at least six more had been founded in colonial America before libraries of this type started appearing first in

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<sup>17</sup> My understanding of 'historical bibliometrics' derives from Simon Burrows, 'Locating the Minister's Looted Books: From Provenance and Library History to the Digital Reconstruction of Print Culture', *Library & Information History*, 31.1 (February 2015), pp. 1-17; see also Jean-Pierre V. M. Herubel, 'Historical Bibliometrics: Its Purpose and Significance to the History of Disciplines', *Libraries & Culture*, 34.4 (Autumn 1999), pp. 380-388.

<sup>18</sup> This theme was addressed in a colloquium held at the University of Liverpool and the Liverpool Athenaeum in January 2014, entitled 'Libraries and the Atlantic World'.

<sup>19</sup> For similar complaints, see Jonathan Rose, 'Alternative Futures for Library History', *Libraries & Culture*, 38.1 (2003), pp. 50-60.

<sup>20</sup> Raven, *London Booksellers*.

Scotland in the 1750s and then in the larger industrial towns of northern England in the 1760s. If the early history of subscription libraries in the Atlantic world seems to subvert long-held assumptions about the relationship between metropole and province in the history of print culture, it raises further questions about the emergence of library culture more broadly. What relationship did these institutions have to each other, and how were they related to earlier, more informal experiments in collective book use and reading?<sup>21</sup> How did these libraries in turn influence library culture elsewhere in the Atlantic (in the Caribbean, the Netherlands, and the Iberian peninsula), and elsewhere in the Eurocentric world (in European spheres of influence in Africa, India, South America and Australia, for instance)? What social, political, and cultural conditions explain the very uneven growth of lending libraries in continental Europe,<sup>22</sup> and how were ideas about library culture, administration and book collecting disseminated to new communities, new territories, and new linguistic contexts? And what of the comparison between library development and collective book use in the Eurocentric world, and in the Far East – where very different relationships emerged between written word and reader?<sup>23</sup> By bringing together scholars from across four continents, the network has started to track how library culture emerged in different national contexts, allowing us to compare how libraries functioned in early Enlightenment Dublin, rapidly industrialising Leeds, plantation Jamaica, colonial Mexico and Venezuela, Revolutionary Amsterdam, Federalist America, and settler Australia.

The wider cultural meanings of library activity in these very different contexts were taken up in the network's second priority, which considered the role of libraries in historical processes of identity construction and community formation.<sup>24</sup> By distributing books to a wider audience than they would otherwise have been able to reach, libraries were one of the vehicles through which shared notions of identity were disseminated amongst 'imagined communities' scattered across the globe, separated by time, language and space. In this empirical sense, the network contributes to a critical rethinking of Benedict Anderson's influential ideas about the role of print in the emergence of national identity.<sup>25</sup> But the network has also reinforced the extent to which libraries "are greater than the sum of their

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<sup>21</sup> For an informal precursor to the formal community library in the metropolis, see Markman Ellis, 'Coffee-house Libraries in Mid Eighteenth-Century London', *The Library*, 10.1 (2009), pp. 3-40.

<sup>22</sup> There is a useful summary in Martyn Lyons, *A History of Reading and Writing in the Western World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Joseph McDermott, *A Social History of the Chinese Book: Books and Literati Culture in Late Imperial China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> This theme was addressed primarily in a colloquium held at Dr Williams's Library and Queen Mary University London in January 2015, entitled 'Libraries in the Community'.

<sup>25</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

books”, even before elaborate physical spaces were routinely built to house them.<sup>26</sup> Libraries were communities in their own right, allowing us to enumerate on the one hand the exclusionary tactics employed by libraries of different kinds to restrict membership along political, social, religious or ethnic boundaries, and on the other to recover the practices (some of them illicit) that opened up library books for people on the margins of established reading communities. Particularly striking were the recurring practices of book giving and of book copying noted by network speakers; seemingly philanthropic and ‘public’-spirited donations of books allowed some members to shape in material ways the sort of community values their libraries came to reflect, while marginal readers in different times and places resorted to circulating transcribed copies of illicit books to overcome governmental, societal or cultural rules and conventions.

Ultimately, the network therefore comes back to the textual world opened up by historic library culture, and a third network priority was to consider new ways of approaching library records to unlock their potential for understanding the circulation and reception of print in the past.<sup>27</sup> Library history has proved itself capable of overturning some of the traditional narratives of intellectual and literary history, but its wider value is sometimes compromised by the disciplinary orientation of researchers. In her pioneering study of the earliest surviving records of a commercial circulating library, for instance, Jan Fergus focuses overwhelmingly on novels to the detriment of genres which she readily admits were “all much more popular among ... adult customers”, including “almanacs, school texts, Bibles, common payer books, divinity, sermons, history, and belles letters”. Without having access to this data – which Fergus notes was first created using mid-1980s software – scholars interested in how history books or almanacs were circulating at this library will need to replicate the whole process.<sup>28</sup> This is where digital tabulations and analyses of library records made available online can be particularly useful, including the *What Middletown Read* database, the *Easton Library Company Database*, and the *New York Society Library’s Circulation Records*.<sup>29</sup> These encourage a more holistic approach to library records, shaped not by the researcher’s own disciplinary background, but by the research

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<sup>26</sup> Black, Pepper and Bagshaw, *Books, Buildings and Social Engineering*, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> This theme was addressed in a colloquium held at the Newberry Library and Loyola University Chicago in May 2014, entitled ‘Digital Approaches to Library History’.

<sup>28</sup> Jan Fergus, *Provincial Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 7, ix.

<sup>29</sup> <[www.bsu.edu/libraries/wmr](http://www.bsu.edu/libraries/wmr)>; <<https://digital.lafayette.edu/collections/eastonlibrary>>; <<https://www.nysoclib.org/collection/ledger/circulation-records-1789-1792/people>>.

demands of the user.<sup>30</sup> However, surviving library records are extremely rare and can hardly be considered representative. As Priya Joshi cautions, “the conclusions one could draw from a single library’s circulation would need to rest closest to the regional, class and social history of that library only and could probably not be applied too widely before becoming irrelevant”.<sup>31</sup>

There is an urgent need, therefore, for library historians to explore seriously the prospect of developing a ‘Union Catalogue’ which links up digital research on libraries of different types, in different places, and at different times, lending greater statistical meaning to the circulation, acquisitions, and holdings data available for individual institutions. Two projects have done this successfully for groups of libraries in specific – though very tightly defined – national and institutional contexts, and their vision is suggestive for what might emerge from a more broadly conceived ‘Union Catalogue’. The revealing *Australian Common Reader* platform gathers together circulation records from seven small-scale subscription libraries alongside diaries, correspondence and other readerly content to recreate the lived experience of reading in rural Australia at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>32</sup> Created using contemporary library management software, *Dissenting Academies Online*’s virtual library system shows the scale and depth of what is now possible, collating together in one place over 40,000 separate loan transactions, featuring six hundred borrowers whose borrowing was selected from among twelve thousand different titles.<sup>33</sup> As such, it will serve as an invaluable guide to the role of books in underpinning the institutional and intellectual infrastructure of Protestant dissent in Georgian Britain for years to come, even though it opens up only one small facet of library culture at this pivotal moment in library history.

In workshopping each of these databases, a number of recurrent themes emerged, particularly the importance of inter-operability. Each of the projects involved significant costs in terms of time and effort, but to ensure that this investment produces important scholarship – and to demonstrate the utility of the data to a wider public – the datasets need to be able to talk to each other. Above all this calls for a consistency of approach that is

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<sup>30</sup> See, for instance, the use made of the database by Lynne Tatlock, ‘The One and the Many: *The Old Mam’selle’s Secret* and the American Traffic in German Fiction (1868-1917)’, in Matt Erlin and Lynne Tatlock (eds.), *Distant Readings: Topologies of German Culture in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Rochester NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2014), pp. 229-258. Tellingly, the volume’s cover image features a bubble graph derived from the ‘What Middletown Read’ database.

<sup>31</sup> Priya Joshi, *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture and the English Novel in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 52.

<sup>32</sup> <[www.australiancommonreader.com](http://www.australiancommonreader.com)>.

<sup>33</sup> <[vls.english.qmul.ac.uk](http://vls.english.qmul.ac.uk)>.



difficult to achieve when the sources themselves are not consistent; even within documentation produced by the same library, there can be wildly fluctuating approaches to data entry, with basic bibliographical details frequently missing from manuscript circulation records and printed catalogues, including place and date of publication, and the name of the publisher. Nevertheless, consistent bibliographical standards need to be applied along with a standard approach to categorising users' occupations and social backgrounds to allow comparisons between libraries to be drawn.

One potential solution to such problems is to work collaboratively, and in greater scale, on a single 'Union Catalogue'. In reflecting on the network's deliberations, Simon Burrows has proposed the development of a large-scale, inter-operable database bringing surviving borrowing registers together with book catalogues, suggestions books, acquisitions ledgers, and book trade records. Emerging from tools that are already being developed for the next stage of his successful *French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe* platform, such a database would need to exploit "a finite ontology" enabling us to "capture, understand, interrogate and analyse" library data alongside "other harvestable historical bibliometric events":

One choice ahead for the community of library historians is whether to embrace a minimalist approach to the integration of existing historical bibliometric library datasets, by focusing on creating inter-operable library history database resources, or instead to embrace the yet more ambitious dream of a more global system, capable of integrating library historical datasets alongside other historical bibliometric information. While perhaps lacking some of the specificities of purpose-built systems, this would nonetheless be capable of delivering powerful new forms of insight through the interaction and mapping of diverse historical bibliometric datasets against potentially vast databanks on library collections, borrowings, and users.<sup>34</sup>

### *Bibliometric Data at the Wigtown Library*

To consider the opportunities opened up by the proposed 'Union Catalogue', the rest of this chapter will revisit the surviving material from one nascent subscription library founded in 1795 in the small Galwegian community of Wigtown, in the southwest corner of Scotland.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Burrows, 'Locating the Minister's Looted Books', pp. 2-3; <fbtee.uws.edu.au/stn/interface/>.

<sup>35</sup> The following discussion of the Wigtown Library records derives from Mark Towsey, 'First Steps in Associational Reading: Book Use and Sociability at the Wigtown Library, 1795-99', *Papers of the*

The Wigtown Subscription Library was the last of the three main urban centres in Galloway to found such an institution (after Kirkcudbright and Stranraer), and followed what had by that time become a familiar model across the English-speaking world, with the learned professions – clergymen, lawyers and medical men – taking the lead alongside local landowners and a smattering of merchants, tradesmen and artisans. What marks Wigtown out for special attention is the survival of a borrowing register for three of its first four years of operation, making it one of only a handful of contemporary libraries for which such circulation records survive. Even so, the documentary record is unusually thin in this instance: with the growth of the collection struggling to keep pace with demand in this early period of institutional development, just under 900 loans – or “bibliometric events” – were recorded overall.<sup>36</sup>

It is quite possible that loans started more informally some time before the first loan was recorded on 4 January 1796 (of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Eloisa* in three volumes to the widow Mrs McCulloch), but the loan registers and associated administrative records make plain the practical difficulties involved in setting up a lending library from scratch in a relatively undeveloped rural backwater, with the books needing to be ordered from wholesalers in Edinburgh and then bound by the local bookbinder James McBryde before being made available to library users. With library managers struggling to raise the funds to enlarge the collection, and suffering long delays in getting hold of the copies they had prioritised, it is understandable that the rate of borrowing declined dramatically after an initial up burst of enthusiasm. Annual borrowing rates declined from 354 loan transactions in 1796, to 274 in 1798 and 194 in 1799, revealing a community of readers steadily working through the books available to them. At the same time, the data clearly implies that reading was a seasonal activity, with loans peaking consistently during the winter months, notwithstanding the additional expense (and notorious personal hazards) involved in reading by candle and firelight. Books were withdrawn much less frequently between August and October, the most crucial moment in the farming calendar when many library members evidently had little time for reading.

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*Bibliographical Society of America*, 103.4 (2009), pp. 455-495; the material on which it is based is held at the Hornel Library, Broughton House, Kirkcudbright, MS 5/27, Regulations of the Wigtown Subscription Library; MS 11/28-30, Borrowing Books of the Wigtown Subscription Library.

<sup>36</sup> In contrast, the surviving folio borrowing registers of the Charleston Library Society for 14 July 1811 to 28 February 1817 record 41,973 loan transactions, featuring 3,033 separate titles and 260 library users; Isabelle Lehuu, ‘Reconstructing Reading Vogues in the Old South: Borrowings from the Charleston Library Society, 1811-1817’, in Shafquat Towheed and W. R. Owens (eds.), *The History of Reading, vol. 2: International Perspectives, c.1500-1990* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 64-83, at p. 66.

These important impressions of how library culture functioned in Wigtown are only possible through detailed analysis of bibliometric data collected from the library circulation and administration records, but this material becomes still more valuable for the wider history of reading when we think about which books were actually taken off the shelves. The collection can only be described as compact throughout this period; although no catalogue comes down to us, a grand total of 59 titles were borrowed in the four years covered by the surviving circulation records, while we know of a handful more that were ordered in this time. Even so, bibliographical analysis of these loans provides an invaluable insight into reading tastes in this small community newly introduced to associational book culture (see fig. 1). Particularly striking is the community's persistent interest in polite historiography, with history books featuring in around 40 percent of all loan transactions. This perhaps points to a local taste for amateur scholarship amongst well-educated landowners and clergymen (some of whom were to become published authors in their own right), and to a more widespread popular zeal for patriotic reading at a time when Britain's celebrated constitutional 'liberty' was being called into question in the fallout from the French Revolution both at home and abroad. But it also reflects history's crucial role in domestic education as a fashionable genre repeatedly recommended to the ever-expanding ranks of leisured readers by pedagogical writers such as Thomas Sheridan, Hester Chapone and Hannah More.<sup>37</sup> Thus Gibbon was borrowed by readers across the Wigtown Library's social compass, from the clergymen and amateur antiquarians John Dickson, John Graham, and John Steven, through to the banker Matthew Campbell, the surgeon Samuel Shortridge, the tanner John McGill, and the widows McKie and Milroy. Such records even hint at how engaged readers could be in what they read; since the number of volumes that could be borrowed at any one time was generally limited, the registers allow us to track clusters of readers working their way through multi-volume texts like Hume's *History of England* and Henry's *History of Great Britain* – and to glimpse readers who borrowed one volume without ever returning to borrow the rest.

Author, Title	Number of borrowings	Number of borrowers
<i>Bell's British Theatre</i>	90	23
Gibbon, <i>Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire</i>	79	16
Henry, <i>History of Great Britain</i>	53	14

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Sheridan, *A Plan of Education for the Young Nobility and Gentry of Great Britain* (London: E. and C. Dilly, 1769), pp. 97-98; Hester Chapone, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind, Addressed to a Young Lady* (London: H. Hughs, 1773), 2:212; Hannah More, *Hints Towards Forming the Character of a Young Princess* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1805), pp. 154-161.

Fielding, <i>Works</i>	53	12
Cook, <i>Voyages</i>	52	11
Gillies, <i>History of Ancient Greece</i>	37	11
Smollett, <i>History of England</i>	33	11
Hume, <i>History</i>	31	7
<i>Monthly Review</i>	30	14
Johnson, <i>Lives of the British Poets</i>	24	8
<i>Annual Register</i>	23	11
<i>Fool of Quality</i>	23	6
Cox, <i>Travels</i>	22	10
Raynal, <i>West Indies</i>	21	6
Moore, <i>Zeluco</i>	20	12
Robertson, <i>Charles V</i>	19	6
Rousseau, <i>Eloisa</i>	18	7
Watson, <i>Philip II</i>	16	6
Arnot, <i>History of Edinburgh</i>	12	11
Knox, <i>Essays</i>	12	8
Moore, <i>View of Society</i>	12	7
Lyttleton, <i>Henry the Second</i>	12	5
Guthrie, <i>General History of Scotland</i>	11	9
<i>Critical Review</i>	11	8
Savary, <i>Egypt</i>	11	7
Watson, <i>Philip III</i>	11	5
Volney, <i>Travels</i>	10	7
[Mackenzie et al] <i>The Mirror</i>	10	5
Smollett, <i>Roderick Random</i>	10	4

Figure 1: Books borrowed from the Wigtown Subscription Library, 1796-1799 (works borrowed 10 times or more).

The apparent popularity of didactic and morally improving novels by Henry Fielding, Henry Brooke and John Moore perhaps fits more neatly into conventional accounts of reading habits in the late eighteenth century, which in Ralf Engelsing's classic thesis is thought to have witnessed a Reading Revolution with people reading more 'extensively' and across a wider range of genres than before.<sup>38</sup> Classical literature (a key component of the old, 'intensive' approach to reading) is certainly notable for its absence from the Wigtown ledgers, as are religious or devotional books. Indeed, perhaps the most striking feature of the Wigtown borrowing data is the demonstrable interest in play reading and amateur dramatics in a Presbyterian community that should have been utterly resistant to such forms of entertainment, with *Bell's British Theatre* – leading the list of most frequently borrowed books – collecting together 140 plays in 21 volumes by playwrights including Colley Cibber,

<sup>38</sup> Reinhard Wittmann, 'Was there a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?', in Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier (eds.), *A History of Reading in the West* (1995; trans., Lydia G. Cochrane, Cambridge: Polity, 1999), pp. 284-312.

Ben Jonson, Nicholas Rowe and George Farquhar (amongst many others). Meanwhile, the interest in the canon-forming imperative that was such a fundamental feature of late eighteenth-century critical culture is also reflected in the circulation of Johnson's popular *Lives of the English Poets*, and indeed in the regular withdrawal of issues of the *Monthly Review*, the *Annual Register*, and the *Critical Review* – all of which were no doubt used to help readers decide what to borrow next from the library.

All of this is hugely suggestive for those interested in the history of reading and in the reception and social impact of specific works and genres, well rewarding the significant amount of time and effort it takes to transcribe and digest such a detailed dataset. But the Wigtown data – as with all surviving datasets – is strictly limited, and can only contribute so much to our understanding of historic reading habits. In this instance, the limited size of the nascent collection at the Wigtown Library throughout the period for which loan records survive is perhaps the most significant impediment, and must have severely restricted the choice available to readers. Some members may well have borrowed (or bought) canonical texts like Hume's *History* or Rousseau's *Eloisa* before the library came into being, while readers could only choose from the select list of titles the library management committee had decided to acquire in the first years of their association. As numerous commentators have indicated, such selections often owed a great deal to the advice offered up in the *Monthly*, the *Critical* and the *Annual Register* – so the fact that our list of most frequently borrowed books looks very much like any list of critically approved books produced in the late eighteenth century is not all that surprising.<sup>39</sup>

For these reasons, a comparative approach to the surviving library records is absolutely crucial in establishing how significant or unusual some of the reading practices on display at Wigtown – and indeed elsewhere – might have been. The wide circulation of histories by Hume, Gibbon, Robertson, Henry and Smollett tallies very well with what we know from other libraries for which such evidence survives, in a variety of different institutional, cultural and demographic contexts, and has been picked up by scholars writing about the reception of Enlightenment culture in England, Scotland and North America.<sup>40</sup> Less frequently noted is the prominence of play reading, which Wigtown shares with another Scottish subscription library for which borrowing records survive – the Selkirk Subscription

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<sup>39</sup> Allan, *Nation of Readers*, pp. 8-9, 86; Raven, *London Booksellers*, p.221; Towsey, 'First Steps', pp. 470-472.

<sup>40</sup> David Allan, *Making British Culture: English Readers and the Scottish Enlightenment, 1740-1830* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008); Mark Spencer, *Hume in Eighteenth-Century America* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005); Mark Towsey, "'The book seemed to sink into oblivion': Reading Hume in Eighteenth-Century Scotland", in Mark Spencer (ed.), *Hume: Historical Thinker, Historical Writer* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013), pp. 81-102.

Library (founded in 1772), where the dramatic works of William Shakespeare, Joanna Baillie, Thomas Otway, John Dryden, and the French playwright Molière all circulated widely alongside *Bell's British Theatre* between 1799 and 1814.<sup>41</sup>

Presbyterian clergymen were deeply involved in founding and managing both libraries, while the orthodox wing of the Church of Scotland is well known to have fought a number of bitter campaigns against the play-reading proclivities of the Enlightenment *literati* in Edinburgh centred around Moderate playwright (and clergyman) John Home and his clerical colleagues William Robertson, Hugh Blair, Adam Ferguson and Alexander 'Jupiter' Carlyle.<sup>42</sup> How far does the wide circulation of these dramatic works call for an adjustment of our understanding of the cultural meaning of play reading in Enlightenment Scotland, and how does this fit with the reception afforded to play books at libraries elsewhere for which such evidence survives? No scholar has yet attempted to write a history of play reading in the long eighteenth century from any disciplinary perspective, and we will not be able to understand more fully the wider significance of this data until the detailed empirical and critical work is done across the full range of eighteenth-century libraries and sources for reading experiences.

#### *Modelling the 'Union Catalogue'*

This example points in a small but significant way to the interpretive and interdisciplinary opportunities bound up in the proposed 'Union Catalogue'. There are very few surviving sets of circulation records for subscription libraries founded in the eighteenth-century Atlantic World, each of which speaks to the distinctive interests and occupations of the specific reading communities who produced them. The Selkirk circulation records date from a more mature period in the library's history, by which time members had fully thirty years of collective book acquisition behind them. This gave Selkirk subscribers far greater opportunity to specialise in particular kinds of books, opening up fascinating perspectives on how tenant farmers combined with town-dwelling clergymen, surgeons and solicitors in reading collectively about agricultural improvement, local history, vernacular poetry, or

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<sup>41</sup> Scottish Borders Archives, Hawick, S/PL/7, Selkirk Subscription Library Registers, 1799-1814; *Bell's British Theatre* also figures on the list of most widely circulated works at the Charleston Library Society in the 1810s, alongside a number of other playbooks; Lehuu, 'Reconstructing Reading Vogues', p. 70.

<sup>42</sup> Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985).

polite education.<sup>43</sup> More complex again are the surviving circulation records of the Bristol Library Society. Only a tiny fraction of Bristol loans have so far attracted scholarly attention, despite the fact that they run in an unbroken sequence from 1773 to 1857 in 77 folio volumes, potentially shedding unrivalled light on the cultural, commercial and political reading of a community unusually exposed to the cosmopolitan currents of the maritime world – a community borrowing more than 2,000 books annually by the time of the turbulent 1790s.<sup>44</sup> No less potentially suggestive are the circulating records surviving on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean for the Charleston Library Society, the New York Society Library, and the Easton Library Company in rural Pennsylvania, amongst other known examples. At a time when the newly independent United States were busy building a nation for themselves, American circulation records point to the long persistence of literary and intellectual influences from the former motherland, particularly at Charleston, which long retained its “Atlantic-wards outlook, together with [its] distain for both the immediate north and the Carolina backcountry”.<sup>45</sup>

Great time and effort is needed to transcribe, tabulate and interpret each of these sets of circulation records, and yet the stories that we can tell about them are limited by the range of local beliefs, influences and constraints that shaped borrowers’ choices at the libraries involved – and by the disciplinary instincts of each scholar or curator who works on them. The scholar who wants to trace the history of play reading beyond Wigtown and Selkirk will currently need to sift methodically through each set of original sources, accounting for every single loan if play reading is to be put in its widest possible context. But if all of these borrowing registers were fed into a single database (or an inter-operable sequence of linked databases) adopting consistent vocabulary to describe books and borrowers, a standardised approach to data management, and made available on an open access basis, such enquiries would be accomplished in little more than a few hours searching online – thereby opening up a much more comprehensive understanding of book borrowing in the long eighteenth century than has yet been possible, together with more nuanced histories of reading targeted at specific authors, genres and readers.

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<sup>43</sup> Mark Towsey, “‘Store their Minds with Much Valuable Knowledge’: Reading for Improvement at the Selkirk Subscription Library, 1799-1814’, forthcoming in the *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* (2015).

<sup>44</sup> The classic study remains Paul Kaufman, *Borrowings from the Bristol Library, 1773–1784: A Unique Record of Reading Vogues* (Charlottesville, VA: Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia, 1960). The estimate for volume of loans in the 1790s derives from my own unpublished research on the original registers, held at Bristol Central Library, B7465-7468, Registers of the Bristol Library Society, 1796-99.

<sup>45</sup> Raven, *London Booksellers*, p. 17; for the prominence of English novels in Charleston loans of the 1810s, see Lehuu, ‘Reconstructing Reading Vogues’, pp. 74-79.

For the few remaining circulation records to be statistically meaningful, of course, our 'Union Catalogue' would need to be founded on careful bibliographical analysis of the much larger (though still relatively manageable) corpus of book catalogues that survive for eighteenth-century subscription libraries. The two types of source material are co-dependent in histories of reading, with the handful of borrowing registers allowing us to assess the relative frequency with which titles were withdrawn at specific libraries (for a time at least), and the catalogues giving us a more detailed sense of what books readers had available to them, what editions tended to be acquired (and in which formats), and how collections developed over time. Notably, the more favourable survival rates for library catalogues allow for much more rigorous statistical analysis; 51 surviving catalogues have so far been discovered for roughly 250 associational libraries founded in Scotland before 1830,<sup>46</sup> giving the prospective historian of play reading at Wigtown and Selkirk a more acute understanding of how common it was for such libraries to make copies of Shakespeare's works or *Bell's British Theatre* available to subscribers.

Our growing resource might eventually spread out to include other types of library, in the Atlantic world and beyond, including circulation records and catalogues that survive for the charitably endowed libraries at Haddington or Innerpefferay, or university libraries at St Andrews, Harvard or King's College (re-named Columbia in 1784). We might incorporate data from the much maligned commercial circulating libraries, which both Jan Fergus (obliquely) and Norbert Schürer (more stridently) have suggested offered a more nuanced fare than their contemporary reputation (and much later commentary) would have us believe.<sup>47</sup> And we might include records of private book ownership, to capture those library members who bought their own copy of Shakespeare's *Works*, and those who were able to borrow volumes from neighbours, friends or relatives.<sup>48</sup> Such outward spread is necessary because eighteenth-century readers – much like Michel de Certeau's reading 'poachers' – borrowed from different types of library, at different times, and sometimes for different purposes even though these processes can be exceptionally difficult to trace.<sup>49</sup>

The digital platform might then allow for bridges to be built to other large-scale collections of eighteenth-century bibliometric data available online, allowing us to probe still

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<sup>46</sup> Mark Towsey, "'All Partners may be Enlightened and Improved by Reading them": the Distribution of Enlightenment Books in Scottish Subscription Library Catalogues, 1750-c.1820', *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, 28 (2007), pp. 20-43.

<sup>47</sup> Fergus, *Provincial Readers*, 7; Norbert Schürer, 'Four Catalogs of the Lowndes Circulating Library, 1755-66', *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 101.3 (2007), pp. 329-357.

<sup>48</sup> For specific examples, see Lehuu, 'Reconstructing Reading Vogues', pp. 68-69.

<sup>49</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (trans. Steven F. Rendall; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 165-176; Colclough, *Consuming Texts*, p. 104.



more deeply the intellectual and cultural landscapes in which library users encountered library books. This would certainly need to include the rich publishing data available in the ESTC (particularly important for standardising bibliographic data on titles and specific editions owned by libraries, where these can be identified), as well as book trade records such as those of the famous Enlightenment publishing and wholesaling business the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel, collected together in the *French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe* database. Cross-referencing library records with those of booksellers, printers and publishers will allow us to think more coherently about how the rich library culture of the long eighteenth century distorted the contemporary book market – guaranteeing a market for certain authors or kinds of books on the one hand, whilst on the other allowing publishers to manage the decline of less fashionable genres. Some library communities certainly suspected booksellers of exploiting their collective demand for books to keep prices artificially high and to offload slow-selling stock, and were constantly on the look out for more affordable channels of supply.<sup>50</sup>

Commercial platforms like Gage’s *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online (ECCO)*, Readex’s *Early American Imprints* and *Google Books*, together with non-profit platforms like HathiTrust and the Internet Archive, provide surrogate copies of the material library subscribers used, enabling future users of our ‘Union Catalogue’ to read for themselves both canonical material and more idiosyncratic readers’ choices now all but forgotten. Used in tandem with *ECCO*, Proquest’s vast *British Periodicals Collection* and the British Library’s *Burney Collection of British Newspapers* might then be tagged for printed reviews and contemporary commentary on the books acquired by eighteenth-century libraries – sources which library members themselves often relied upon to inform individual and collective reading choices, as we have seen, and to shape how those choices were then read and interpreted. We can even use newspapers to develop an event-driven interpretation of library activity, as Erin Schreiner has done to explain the unusually low number of loans at the New York Society Library on Independence Day in 1791, when many of the society’s members were involved in a parade organised by the Tammany Society.<sup>51</sup>

In an ideal world, our ‘Union Catalogue’ would also need to adopt emerging digital techniques dealing with wider aspects of the relationship between books and their readers in the long eighteenth century. Where library copies survive, our ‘Union Catalogue’ could incorporate scanned images of provenance marks, marginalia, dog-eared pages, grease stains, soiling and other evidence of use – such as those exhibited so powerfully online by

<sup>50</sup> Allan, *Nation of Readers*, p. 94; Raven, *London Booksellers*, p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> <<http://www.nysoclib.org/blog/july-1791-new-york-society-library>>.

curators, students and scholars at the *Jesuit Libraries Project* at Loyola University Chicago and the Northern Congregational College Collection in *Dissenting Academies Online*.<sup>52</sup> The Open University's *Reading Experience Database* tracks recorded reader response without currently including book borrowing and ownership, thereby allowing us to investigate how the books encountered by our library subscribers were actually used and interpreted by readers whose correspondence, diaries, commonplace books, autobiographies and reading notes survive.<sup>53</sup> For the peculiarly permeable barrier between reading and writing that was facilitated by the collaborative scope of eighteenth-century periodicals, digital projects like the one currently being developed on *The Lady's Magazine* by scholars at the University of Kent will be vital too, in detailing not only what readers were able to read in the specific issues they borrowed, but also uncovering where library members actually contributed to such periodicals in the form of letters, poetry, short stories, or factual reports of a scientific, topographical or antiquarian nature.<sup>54</sup>

The opportunities that the proposed 'Union Catalogue' opens up for deepening and enriching our understanding of lost library culture do not stop there, for as Jonathan Rose has suggested library records "become revealing only when they are situated in a thick description of the community that the library in question serves".<sup>55</sup> To allow us to understand more fully the social penetration of library culture, the database will need to collect detailed prosopographical data on library borrowers and library members. Christine Pawley and William St Clair have both emphasised the ability of libraries to spread reading culture further down the social scale, to "non-elite groups" and to those who "were probably the first generation in their families to have had regular access to newly published books".<sup>56</sup> Membership lists can be index-linked to trade directories, university matriculation records, church records, freeholder lists, military service records, bankruptcies, and other sources that can be used to identify and deepen our understanding of those who joined libraries. Once this data is in place, it will then be possible to associate specific trends in library loans or book suggestions with specific groups of library members categorised by social status, political affiliation, or church membership. By feeding in residential

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<sup>52</sup> <<http://jesuitlibrariesprovenanceproject.com>>; <<http://vls.english.qmul.ac.uk>>. The New York Society Library ran an exhibition on marginalia in the collection from February to August 2015; see the announcement on <<https://www.nysoclib.org/events/annotated-books>>.

<sup>53</sup> <<http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/>>.

<sup>54</sup> <<http://blogs.kent.ac.uk/ladys-magazine/>>.

<sup>55</sup> Jonathan Rose, 'Arriving at a History of Reading', *Historically Speaking*, 5.3 (January 2004), pp. 36-39, at p. 35.

<sup>56</sup> Christine Pawley, 'Retrieving Readers: Library Experiences', *The Library Quarterly*, 76.4 (October 2006), pp. 379-387, at p. 379; William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 250.

information, we will be able to map the circulation of books using geospatial software,<sup>57</sup> showing how far books travelled from libraries – and, since many of these libraries operated very limited opening hours, often of only two or three hours per week, we might also be able to catch sight of library subscribers travelling to the bookshelves together, perhaps to take out different volumes of the same multi-volume text.

On the rare occasions when the surviving data allows us to do so, we will even be able to use our ‘Union Catalogue’ to investigate the changing role of library provision in the life cycle of the reader, helping us to understand the evolving meaning of literacy as young men found jobs, set up families, grew old and retired. In so doing, our ‘Union Catalogue’ could also help unlock more fully the hidden relationship between female readers and library culture. While a handful of widows turn out to have been amongst the most active borrowers at both the Wigtown Library and the Charleston Library Society,<sup>58</sup> the patriarchal structures of British society meant that library subscriptions (as with other types of property) tended to be held by fathers and husbands rather than by women in their own right – and thus their names only rarely appear in library records. By revealing the frequency with which male subscribers’ reading choices changed during courtship, after marriage, and following the birth of children, our ‘Union Catalogue’ will further confirm long-held scholarly suspicion that male library subscribers routinely borrowed material on their female relatives’ behalf.<sup>59</sup>

### *Reconstructing Lost Library Culture*

While the ‘Union Catalogue’ will thereby allow us to overcome some of the well established difficulties in animating the relationship between books and their readers,<sup>60</sup> the work of the ‘Community Libraries’ network reiterates time and again that eighteenth-century library culture was not purely about the provision of books. By incorporating biographical data on library members, our ‘Union Catalogue’ will enable scholars to build up a detailed picture of the various social networks that facilitated library culture, be they professional, religious,

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<sup>57</sup> For Katie Halsey’s developing project on the Innerpeffray Library, which uses GIS mapping to show the movement of books borrowed, see <<http://www.sharpweb.org/innerpeffray-library-a-new-research-project/>>.

<sup>58</sup> Towsey, ‘First Steps’, pp.460-62; Lehuu, ‘Reconstructing Reading Vogues’, pp. 68, 72-74.

<sup>59</sup> Allan, *Nation of Readers*, pp. 78-82, 222-224; Fergus, *Provincial Readers*, pp. 209-211; Raven, *London Booksellers*, pp. 16, 220.

<sup>60</sup> John Brewer, ‘Reconstructing the Reader: Prescriptions, Texts and Strategies in Anna Larpent’s Reading’, in James Raven, Helen Small and Naomi Tadmor (eds.), *Practice and Representation of Reading* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 226-245, at p. 227.

political, or familial, and of the relative roles played by specific individuals or groups in founding libraries, developing their collections, or taking them in new directions. Our membership lists might be linked to membership lists maintained for other clubs and societies in the long eighteenth century, such as those collated by the 'Networks of Improvement' project at the University of York.<sup>61</sup>

This is where the comparison between active and inactive library membership becomes interesting. Book borrowing in the first years of the Wigtown Library was dominated by a small group of readers excluded from the formal sociability of the society by social status or gender. Five women accounted for 151 loans out of 898 overall, including the widows McCulloch and Milroy who signed for over fifty separate loans apiece. They were joined in making extensive use of the collections by a group of enterprising young men lacking in academic training or access books from elsewhere, such as the tenant farmer Ebenezer Drew, the tailor John McGill, and the vintner Alexander Murray, who hosted the society's elaborate annual dinners. Conversely, the library was founded and run by a group of wealthy, powerful and highly educated subscribers – all of them men – who rarely borrowed books in this period, including the county's leading law officer, Commissary McConnell, the Earl of Selkirk's estate manager William Mure, and various burgesses, magistrates and clergymen. These men led the library's anniversary meetings, dominated the managerial committee, and showed an insatiable appetite for associational activities (minute taking, ballot voting, rule making and financial accounting) that were perfectly designed to promote the kind of formal social interaction prescribed by leading authorities of the Enlightenment.<sup>62</sup> Such practices only become apparent from a thorough study of one library's circulation and administrative records; our 'Union Catalogue' will enable us to categorise such library patrons, projectors and facilitators globally, tracking how they emerged in specific communities, and how their relationship with libraries changed over time as libraries matured and as these subscribers themselves moved on to new communities and new civic projects.

If some individuals founded subscription libraries not for the books they provided but for the associational values they promoted, the administrative records produced by them – the minute books, correspondence, rules, published mission statements and commemorative pamphlets – are important in helping us to understand the myriad ways in which they sought to shape communities. In Wigtown, for example, the committee voted

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<sup>61</sup> <<https://networksofimprovement.wordpress.com>>.

<sup>62</sup> David Allan, 'Politeness and the Politics of Culture: An Intellectual History of the Eighteenth-Century Subscription Library', *Library & Information History*, 29.3 (August 2013), pp. 159-169.

that the town itself should become an honorary member of the Library, conveying on the symbolic figure of the eldest residing magistrate full membership privileges at the benevolent expense of the Society. Similar civic intent was repeated elsewhere by libraries throughout the Georgian world. At Arbroath, the management committee agreed to award honorary membership to the impoverished merchant's clerk Alexander Balfour to promote his patriotic poetry.<sup>63</sup> With still grander ambitions in mind, social libraries in the United States allowed local elites to practice republicanism in the decades either side of the Revolutionary War – drawing up model constitutions, electing worthy leaders, and forming non-circulating collections that situated the advancement of knowledge at the heart of the national project. At Charleston, members repeatedly attempted to establish the Library Society as a site of public science (not always with great success), while even the relatively small library community in Selkirk aspired to generate improving agricultural ventures and publications of its own.<sup>64</sup> Our 'Union Catalogue' will need to capture such individual snapshots of library culture, alongside the many instances in which library members – both collectively and as individuals – sponsored books published by subscription and sought to stimulate other forms of local improvement and literary prestige.

In this way, our 'Union Catalogue' will recognise the extent to which libraries constituted an important mode of behaviour in their own right, building cultural capacity, promoting civil society and disseminating a sense of Enlightened civilisation. By adopting a wide enough comparative lens, it will ultimately allow us to track in unprecedented detail how these behaviours moved across the eighteenth-century world. Little sustained scholarship has yet emerged on this phenomenon, but network members have uncovered suggestive evidence of library subscribers who carried the seeds of library culture with them when they moved from one place to another. For instance, Jon Mee has noted that members of the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society were later implicated in the foundation of the Hackney Literary Institution and Subscription Library (1815) and the South African Literary Society (1824) in Cape Town.<sup>65</sup> Selkirk's founder, the Revd Robert Douglas, was the prime mover in the subscription library set up twenty-five years later in the nearby manufacturing community of Galashiels (whilst retaining his Selkirk subscription for a decade after the Galashiels library was established), and at least two members of the

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<sup>63</sup> Towsey, *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment*, p. 85.

<sup>64</sup> Raven, *London Booksellers*, pp. 166-183, 220; for Selkirk, see Towsey, "'Store their Minds with Much Valuable Knowledge'".

<sup>65</sup> Jon Mee, 'Trans-Pennine Enlightenment', unpublished paper given at the 'Networks of Improvement' conference held at the University of York in March 2015.

Wigtown Library had earlier subscribed to the subscription library in Kirkcudbright.<sup>66</sup> And once again, the tentacles of library culture can be found spreading out from provincial Scotland into the wider world; the Niagara Library was founded in 1800 by a man whose relatives subscribed to the Kirkcudbright Library, while the first associational library in Tasmania – the Bothwell Literary Society – was founded by a Church of Scotland minister who had been brought up and trained in Wigtown.<sup>67</sup> Keith Adkins suggests that associational libraries like the Bothwell Literary Society provided “improving and instructional literature for the promotion of education, prosperity, sobriety and cohesion in the fledgling community”,<sup>68</sup> but they were also a collective investment in civil society, imported by community leaders to overcome the dislocated isolation and rampant self-interest of early colonial Australia. As Raven notes, the Charleston Library Society – one of the earliest associational libraries anywhere in the Anglophone world – “was founded to prove that the civilisation of Britain and Europe was transportable and sustainable”.<sup>69</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The civilising mission of associational libraries in Tasmania and the American South takes us back to fundamental questions about the role of print in forging and disseminating new forms of identity in the modern world; as Raven himself notes, the books purchased from London booksellers by the Charleston Library Society “were lifelines of identity, and they were direct material links to a present and past European culture”.<sup>70</sup> These compelling claims – made on behalf of one exceptionally well-documented library positioned at an important node in the eighteenth-century Atlantic – exemplify the vision sketched out by Jonathan Rose for an “alternative future” for library history in 2003. In this, Rose called for library historians “to break into the historiographical mainstream” by reaching out to the wider history of the book and thereby “addressing the great debates that engage professional historians”. “Since at least the 1940s”, he argues, “library historians have been

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<sup>66</sup> Manley, *Books, Borrowers and Shareholders*, p. 44.

<sup>67</sup> For Andrew Heron’s role in the foundation of the subscription library at Niagara-on-the-Lake, see <<http://www.notlpubliclibrary.org/history.php>>; for the Revd. James Garrett’s role in the foundation of the Bothwell Literary Society in Tasmania, see Keith Adkins, *Reading in Colonial Tasmania: The Early Years of the Evandale Subscription Library* (Melbourne: Ancora Press, 2010), p. 49.

<sup>68</sup> Adkin, *Reading in Colonial Tasmania*, p. 167.

<sup>69</sup> Raven, *London Booksellers*, p. 218.

<sup>70</sup> Raven, *London Booksellers*, p. 7.

explaining how society constructs libraries; now they are explaining how libraries construct society".<sup>71</sup>

The proposed 'Union Catalogue' offers a tantalising vision for the next step forward in this mission, unlocking the analytical power of historical bibliometric database software to allow scholars from diverse disciplinary perspectives to recover and interpret global patterns of book use and sociability in the long eighteenth-century. Some of these plans may yet be "castles in the air", as the subversive late Georgian library user Anne Lister liked to call her speculative ideas for the future,<sup>72</sup> and they will undoubtedly require substantial collaborative scholarly energy to pull off, not to mention the funding to match. The sheer scale and potential reach of the 'Union Catalogue' may also require us to adopt a modular approach, dealing with different types of library and different territories in turn, thereby enriching and deepening the data incrementally over distinct phases of work.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless the digital tools required "are fast becoming a reality",<sup>74</sup> and the success of the Community Libraries network has brought together a group of collaboratively-minded scholars with the energy and the will to implement them. Their work is proving instrumental in reconstructing a lost library culture that acted not only to encourage and facilitate a taste for reading in the long eighteenth century, but also to bring fundamental change to the communities in which library members lived.

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<sup>71</sup> Rose, 'Alternative Future', p. 53.

<sup>72</sup> Jill Liddington, *Female Fortune: Land, Gender, and Authority. The Anne Lister Diaries and Other Writings, 1833-36* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1998), p. 45; Jacqueline Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 161.

<sup>73</sup> One model here might be the Universal Short Title Catalogue at the University of St Andrews, which originally worked on French language books before turning to other areas of Europe, including the Iberian Peninsula and the Low Countries; see <[www.ustc.ac.uk](http://www.ustc.ac.uk)>.

<sup>74</sup> Burrows, 'Locating the Minister's Looted Books', p. 2.