Reading Has a History

‘Reading has a history. But how can we recover it?’ Since Robert Darnton posed this question 20 years ago, historians, book historians and literary scholars have done a great deal to recover the history of reading. Most studies of reading in Britain completed during the mid-twentieth century focused on improvements in the production and distribution of texts. For example, R. D. Altick’s *The English Common Reader* (1957) traces that emergence of the ‘mass reading public’ during the period 1774–1900 by looking at changes in copyright law, the provision of education, printing techniques and distribution methods. Using a wide range of printed sources, Altick worked to rediscover the best-selling books and periodicals of the period, from the cheap editions of British Classics published by Cooke and Bell after the abolition of perpetual copyright in 1774, through the great increase in the circulation of weekly newspapers in the 1840s, and on to the ‘cheap journalism’ and ‘sixpenny reprint novels’ of the 1880s and 1890s. Altick’s work is heavily reliant upon publishers’ estimates of circulation figures, government reports and contemporary articles on the cheap press, but as William St Clair has noted, it does at least provide some ‘quantified’ information on the formation of readerships. Altick also often gives rather contentious summaries of what a text was like. For example, *Household Words* ‘which began its career in 1850 with a (short-lived) circulation of 100,000’ is described as ‘sometimes banal and over sentimental ... with little appeal to the average working-class reader’. Although in this instance he provides no evidence for their rejection of Dickens’s weekly paper, Altick was particularly interested in the way in which working-class readers made sense of texts. As Jonathan Rose notes ‘only one chapter of his book actually deals directly with the common reader’, but Altick’s use of working-class autobiography to explore the reading practices of
‘intellectually ambitious workmen’ has been widely influential. His conclusion that working-class readers had little access to contemporary authors before the 1850s is one that is endorsed by several recent studies.\(^5\)

*The English Common Reader* was one of a number of studies published during the mid-twentieth century that tried to produce a much more sympathetic account of the working-class reader than anything which had gone before. Indeed, Altick’s work needs to be placed in the context of R. K. Webb’s *The British Working-Class Reader* (1955), Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) and Raymond Williams’s *Culture and Society* (1958).\(^6\) These studies, Williams argued, were part of a rejection of earlier descriptions of modern print culture, such as Q. D. Leavis’s *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), which tended to ‘concentrate on what is bad and to neglect what is good’ about ‘popular culture’.\(^7\) Hoggart’s demand ‘to know very much more about how people *used* much of the stuff which to us might seem merely dismissible trash’ has proved an inspiration to many historians of reading including Jonathan Rose.\(^8\) Roger Chartier has argued that *The Uses of Literacy* was important because it showed that ‘the culture of the popular classes, far from being reduced to that embodied in the productions of mass culture, was characterised by a relationship of defiance and defensiveness vis-à-vis the messages it received and consumed’.\(^9\)

During the past 20 years the work of Altick on print production and Hoggart on consumption has been revised and refined. As James Raven, Helen Small and Naomi Tadmor have argued, ‘major cataloguing projects and the specialist work of a new generation of historical bibliographers have meant that is now possible to chart with far more accuracy the timing and character of the upturn in English domestic publication from the early modern period onward’. The development of national bibliographies, such as the *English Short Title Catalogue* (ESTC), has allowed a comprehensive reconstruction of print production to 1800. These catalogues reveal a rapid escalation in the number of titles published during the eighteenth century – from 21,000 during the 1710s, to more than 56,000 in the 1790s – but they only provide a partial picture of the reading culture of the period.\(^10\) The short title catalogues ‘do not fairly represent what was collected, read, or acted upon’ because they exclude books printed outside Britain and cannot (of necessity) take account of material circulated in manuscript, or via the second-hand trade.\(^11\) Detailed studies of auction records, private library catalogues and probate inventories have gone some way to filling in these gaps in our knowledge.\(^12\) A book owned is not necessarily a book read, of course, but work on the private collections of Sir Thomas Cornwallis (1509–1604), Elizabeth Puckering (1607–1677) and