Locating the Reader, or What do We do With the Man in the Hat? Methodological Perspectives and Evidence from the *United Kingdom Reading Experience Database, 1450–1945 (UK RED)*

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Using images of readers and textual sources, this essay explains the methodological basis for the Reading Experience Database and international partners. It shows how the RED projects can combine quantitative and qualitative data to locate and recover the experiences of readers through history.

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I want to start this essay by closely examining a series of three interlinked images. Images like these will be very familiar to many scholars working on nineteenth-century British, American or French literature and culture, and are readily recognised as cultural artefacts of the period. However, my interest in these images is a more specific one. As a historian of reading, I am implicitly aware of the material conditions and representations of acts of reading through history. Here are three representations of that most ubiquitous and everyday occurrence in the late nineteenth century urban centres of Europe and North America: reading on the omnibus.

Image 1: Maurice Delondre (n.d.), 'On the Omnibus' (c.1880), oil on canvas.

Image 2: George William Joy (1844–1925), 'The Bayswater Omnibus' (1895), oil on canvas.

Image 3: 'Sunday Morning on a Fifth Avenue Omnibus', American School (nineteenth century), colour lithograph.

The first image, painted by Maurice Delondre, is French, and dates from around 1880. A Parisian man, part banker, part flâneur, perhaps, dressed in a top hat and coat is depicting holding open a newspaper. Is he engrossed in reading it, or is he, as his gaze suggests, fitfully attentive, frequently glancing across the compartment, and using his newspaper as a tool for flirting? Is he an absorbed and immersed intensive newspaper reader, or is he distracted? Is he reading the paper for professional information, or merely to pass the time? The second image is British: a London man, again in a top hat, this time an immersed reader, concentrating on his paper. 'The Bayswater Omnibus' is painted by George William Joy in 1895. The third image is an American lithograph, and is quite clearly derivative: a New York man, reading the newspaper we are told, on a Sunday morning on Fifth Avenue – before church, perhaps? It is the work of an unknown lithographer, and undated, though clearly imitative of Joy's 1895 painting.

In one sense, locating the reader in these three images is disturbingly easy: in each representation, it is the respectable, middle aged white man in a top hat holding open a newspaper. But locating readers in reality, whether in contemporary or archive based historical research, is a much more difficult proposition. Readers are mobile, elusive and extraordinarily numerous; most readers rarely, if ever, record their responses to reading. They may also read and not pass any judgement on what they read; they may engage

with the printed word collectively, may read it out aloud or have it read to them. They may or may not keep the printed matter (books, newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, ephemera) that they have just read, or they may circulate it informally, with no way of recovering the chain or sequences of readers and their responses. Think for example of that most annoying of pre-digital textual phenomena, the chain letter – a process of iteration and circulation which is perpetuated entirely through the act of reading. The vast majority of readers are not in fact easily amenable subjects for this kind of excavation and recovery, nor should we expect them to be. Readers do not exist for the convenience of research projects, and real readers, whether now or in the past, are not like the man in the top hat in the omnibus in the three representations discussed above: they cannot be readily located in a seat on the proverbial omnibus, captured for posterity in the act of reading. And even if, like the man in the top hat, we could locate our readers during the act of reading, we still might not be able to easily identify what they were reading, and how they might have responded to it.

I might have painted a rather impossible picture about how we might locate and interpret readers through history, but the truth, I think, is rather more prosaic and less daunting. While the majority of readers leave little trace of their reading habits and no extant record of their responses, a small but significant minority of readers, whether intentionally or accidentally, record their reading. Often this kind of evidence of reading is recorded in personal correspondence, which may end up published in a volume of letters. Research projects such as the *UK Reading Experience Database* (http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/) have drawn upon such published and unpublished resources to systematically gather together the evidence left behind by readers in history.[1] Here is a perfect example of such a reader – a child prodigy who grew up to be one of Victorian Britain's most prolific poets. In this instance, she records her reading of a range of literature in a letter to her uncle:

> I have read 'Douglas on the Modern Greeks.' I think it a most amusing book … I have not yet finished 'Bigland on the Character and Circumstances of Nations.' An admirable work indeed … I do not admire 'Madame de Sevigne's letters,' though the French is excellent […] yet the sentiment is not novel, and the rhapsody of the style is so affected, so disgusting, so entirely FRENCH, that every time I open the book it is rather as a task than a pleasure -- the last Canto of 'Childe Harold' (certainly much superior to the others) has delighted me more than I can express. The description of the waterfall is the most exquisite piece of poetry that I ever read […]. All the energy, all the sublimity of modern verse is centered in those lines. (Elizabeth Barrett to Samuel Moulton-Barrett, November 1818: *UK RED*, ID: 15975)

The reader here is the child who will grow up to become the famous British nineteenth-century poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861), and this letter to her uncle shows both the precocity of her intellect (this is the reading and writing of a 12 year old), and the extent to which recording a judgement on books that have just been read can help fashion a sense of identity and self-worth. Not only has she been reading Frederick Sylvester North Douglas's comparative analysis of Greece, *An Essay on Certain Points of Resemblance between the Ancient and Modern Greeks* (Douglas), but she has started John Bigland's polemical history, *An Historical Display of the Effects of Physical and Moral Causes on the Character and Circumstances of Nations* (Bigland); neither of these books were written for children. Both were recent publications, and expensive to buy for the standards of the time. For Elizabeth Barrett, Madame de Sévigné's letters (Sévigné), an established model for belles-lettres, are cloyingly conventional, while Byron's verse – the last canto of the just published and highly acclaimed *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (Byron) – is original and captivating. Barrett contrasts French affectation with British originality, and Enlightenment style with Romantic sublimity. This literary judgement is expressed in a letter to a member of her extended family (her uncle, Samuel Moulton-Barrett) and suggests that she already craved recognition as an aspiring writer and accomplished reader.

While Barrett Browning's childhood reading glitters with precocious genius, many extant records of reading evidence are altogether more prosaic; Barrett Browning, after all, was no ordinary reader. In contrast and over a century later is the British 25 year old woman Pamela Slater's record of her reading in response to the Mass Observation sociology project's questionnaire about reading in May 1940, which was sent to a large and diverse group of ordinary readers. She lists her newspaper and journal reading (*The New Statesman* and *The Picture Post*) and admits that 'I take most of my opinions on news from the *New Statesman*, none from a daily paper … the editorial columns so often express what I feel that I naturally appreciate the editors views considerably!' (*Mass Observation Online*, Directive Replies 1939–1942, respondent 1009). Slater's judgement of her reading material is significantly less confident and accomplished than that of Elizabeth Barrett; she reads to have her views formed and confirmed by the editorial line of her favourite journal. The evidence is also recorded in a different context – this time not in family correspondence, but in the archives of a research project and prompted by a directed questionnaire, which was part of the process of government information gathering during wartime. The fact that this is a response to a formal request may also have contributed to the rather acquiescent tone of the recorded evidence.

While Pamela Slater's record was in response to a directed questionnaire, the male agricultural worker Ronald Frank agreed to become one of the Mass Observation project's diarists. Recording his daily activities (including reading) during February 1940, Frank lists the new literary magazine *Horizon*, E. M. Forster's biographical study of Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson (Forster) and Beatrice Webb's autobiography *My Apprenticeship* (Webb) as his current reading (*Mass Observation Online*, January 1940 to March 1941, Diarist number 5071). Frank's reading is overtly political; all three publications were broadly Socialist and identified with the rise of the British Labour party. Unlike Barrett's family letter, or Slater's solicited and structured questionnaire response, Frank's account is in the form of one of the richest and most immediate sources for recovering the evidence of reading: the diary.

Whereas diaries embed reading within accounts of (and reflections upon) other aspects of daily life, commonplace books and the records of reading groups concentrate solely on reading itself. The Anglo-Florentine novelist, essayist, critic and art historian Vernon Lee (1856–1935) kept prodigiously detailed commonplace books that recorded her reading from 1887 to 1900; there are 12 volumes of commonplace books totalling some 1,300 pages, and each volume has a list of the titles read during that period appended to the front.[2] Vernon Lee was a formidable intellectual and read widely in many disciplines and in four European languages (English, French, German and Italian). She also kept exceptionally detailed records of her reading. While her commonplace books record detailed and considered engagements with a specific text, they do not register the immediate first impact of the act of reading – the evidence of readers' initial engagement with texts is often recorded in the texts themselves, in the form of notes or marginalia. Vernon Lee was not only a conscientious keeper of commonplace books about her reading, but she also compulsively marked books that she had possessed and read with considerable marginalia.[3] A typical example of this is her copy of Charles Augustus Strong's *A Theory of Knowledge* (Strong), a book that she read on three separate occasions between July 1928 and January 1932; the extensive marginal notes in this volume serve not only as an aid to memory, highlighting her initial responses to Strong's main ideas, but also serves to fashion future re-reading of the text. Marginalia and commonplace books can outline the developing responses of a reader to a text, from initial engagement to concerted reflection and deliberation. Reading and response is not a singular event, but a negotiated and contingent process.

As these examples indicate, we can find the evidence of readers' responses in a wide range of material: personal correspondence, memoirs,

diaries, commonplace books and scrap books, individual and collective marginal marks in owned and borrowed books, in the comment books of libraries, learned societies and public institutions, in the letters to the editor sections of newspapers and magazines, in the minutes of reading groups and societies, in the book acquisition reports of school boards and the notes of censorship committees, in responses to questionnaires and surveys, in fan mail sent to authors, and so on. There are other ways of recovering the evidence of readers, even when the readers themselves have left no record of their own. For example, court room trial transcripts, the official records of prison authorities, the minute books of missionary societies, the regimental records of army units and the surveillance activities of state intelligence services often provide incidental and valuable details of reading and response. Red Cross and prisoner of war camp archives provide considerable evidence of reading, as do ships' captain's log books and the records of medical and psychiatric institutions. Records such as these provide a vast amount of information about reading in the past.

In our own twenty-first century, there is an even greater excess of evidence of reading that is being gathered involuntarily, and is still underutilised in humanities research. Closed-circuit television footage relentlessly and systematically records reading in public spaces, while automatically gathered GPS and other usage data offered through mobile digital networks accurately records the download and use of electronic books and other texts. The collected network data of Amazon's Kindle or Sony's e-reader would provide a detailed picture of current reading habits. The mass digitisation of pre-twentieth century library holdings by Google through the Google books project and Archive.org is bringing to our notice the cumulative freight of readers' marginal marks in borrowed books. And most obviously, the recent extraordinary rise of digital social networking (Facebook, Twitter and the blogosphere, to name a few) offers researchers rich and continuously evolving data about how readers engage with texts.

In fact, there is an extraordinary amount of data of reading and response that has been generated, but the problem is that this data is disaggregated, and not always easily recovered.

Grappling with the disaggregated evidence of both individual readers and reading communities throughout the centuries, historians of reading have often divided their attention between broad text or period based studies, or those which are reader-centred, focussed and highly contingent. So for example, period based studies such as Jan Fergus's *Provincial Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* (Fergus), Kate Flint's exemplary study of Victorian women readers, *The Woman Reader, 1837–1914* (Flint), Ronald

J and Mary Saracino Zboray's study of pre- and post-independence New Englanders, *Everyday Ideas* (Zboray and Saracino Zboray) and William St Clair's political economy of reading, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (St Clair) have amassed considerable data for a particular historical period and geographical space by harnessing a wide range of source material. Conversely, reader-centred studies have concentrated on fleshing out the imaginative universe of a single reader, and thereby offering us a detailed insight into the cultural history of a period, usually through the exhaustive study of a single material archive. Examples include Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (Ginzburg), Robert DeMaria's *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading* (DeMaria), Timothy Ryback's *Hitler's Private Library* (Ryback), Kevin Hayes's *The Road to Monticello: The Life and Mind of Thomas Jefferson* (Hayes) and Ruth Clayton Windscheffel's *Reading Gladstone* (Windscheffel). Indeed, there have traditionally been two opposing approaches to telling the history of reading: the macro-analytical, and the micro-analytical. The impossibility that any individual could read even a small proportion of the cumulative human output of books implicitly urges us to engage with the broader issue of collecting the quantitative, statistical evidence of reading, a methodology that allows us to examine broader trends in reading practices, and make sense of the mind-boggling weight of extant titles and their possible readers. While an individual reader's engagement can tell us little about the broader trends and patterns of *how* a particular text was consumed, collating a range of quantifiable data, such as that offered by print runs, library circulation records, literacy figures, sale prices, average incomes, distribution networks and advertising, can accurately reconstruct the environment for reading in a particular period and territory.

Perhaps the best way of dealing with the plethora of data and sources in the history of reading is to create a searchable, inclusive, yet defined database, allowing us to weigh individual pieces of data equally, while still providing for qualitative and evaluative analysis. Consciously a methodologically inclusive project, the *United Kingdom Reading Experience Database* (*UK RED*) was set up in 1996, and unveiled as an online digital resource in 2007. In gathering data for the project, it has welcomed both macro- and micro-analytical approaches with equal enthusiasm. Housed at the Open University, *UK RED* gathers the evidence of reading of British subjects at home and abroad, as well as visitors' reading in Britain, between 1450 and 1945. It does so while carefully defining the type and accuracy of the data it records (we have some 150 individual data fields), as well as making sure a wide variety of sources can be consulted and harvested for evidence of reading. For the purposes of the project, *UK RED* defines a 'reading expe-

rience' as a 'recorded engagement with a written or printed text – beyond the mere fact of possession' (http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/experience.htm [accessed 23 March 2011]). *UK RED* now has well over 30,000 entries, the majority of them in the period from 1800–1900, an era which coincides with the establishment of mass literacy in Britain. Detailed and combinable search criteria allow users to interrogate the cumulative data in complex and imaginative ways, with filters for gender, age, place, socio-economic group, genre, and so on. *UK RED* is an open access resource committed to the social construction of knowledge; anyone can access its data, or contribute to the research project. Given enough time and data, *UK RED* will be able to start mapping broad trends in British reading habits over the centuries.

While *UK RED* will be able to offer us valuable information about British reading practices through time, books as well as their readers are increasingly mobile across space. In order to start addressing some of the pressing questions about reading across the world, *UK RED* is currently working with research partners in four different countries to internationalise this effort in recovering the evidence of readers. Partner projects have started in Australia, Canada, the Netherlands and New Zealand to multiply the collective effort, ensure interoperability between databases and explore future directions and possibilities for further research collaboration in the history of reading. *UK RED* and its four new partner databases will be linked through a new web infrastructure, *The Reading Experience Database* (RED), which will serve as an integrated search interface (http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/). The new partner reading experience databases will all be doing something different from *UK RED*, capitalising upon the respective strengths of resources, and needs of each particular society, as well as pursuing best practices in the Digital Humanities.

With a much shorter historical period, Australia will be including visual (photographic) records of reading, and oral history records (audio material) of remembered reading, gathering evidence up to the year 2000. The *Australian Reading Experience Database (AusRED)* is housed at Griffith University in Brisbane, and will be constituted within Australia's premier digital resource for research in the Arts, AustLit (http://www.austlit.edu.au/). *AusRED* has already gathered a considerable body of data, which will be made publicly available soon. In including audio-visual material and oral history, the *AusRED* project team are clearly building upon the pioneering work of Martyn Lyons and Lucy Taksa in their landmark study of Australian popular cultural memory, *Australian Readers Remember* (Lyons and Taksa). The Canadian project, the *Canadian Reading Experience Database / Banque de données sur les pratiques de lecture (CAN-RED-LEC)* is housed at

Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and will present a bilingual interface for French and English speaking users. *CAN-RED-LEC* will have a particular interest in the history of immigrant reading, and therefore will utilise geographical information systems to plot the spread of readers across Canada's vast terrain. It will also mine social networking sites for contemporary evidence of reading in Canada. The Dutch project, the *Netherlands Reading Experience Database* (*NL-RED)* will be housed at the University of Utrecht, with the collaboration of the Huygens Instituut KNAW in The Hague (http://www.red-nl.huygens.knaw.nl). *NL-RED* will have the widest historical sweep (c.1000AD–2000), drawing upon the wealth of information already available on manuscript culture and early printing in the Low Countries, and it will also include fictional representations of reading. The New Zealand project, the *New Zealand Reading Experience Database (NZ-RED)* is housed at Victoria University Wellington (http://www.victoria.ac.nz/wtapress/NZ-RED/). *NZ-RED* will offer a bi-cultural project, bringing together Anglophone and Māoritanga concepts of reading and response, but it will also be historically specific, with a first phase of data collection concentrating on the First World War. *NZ-RED* will be particularly innovative in their data acquisition and entry by utilising crowd sourcing. Eventually all five projects will be successively searchable through a single entry portal, and will allow us to begin testing hypotheses about reading in a much wider context. New research questions and contexts will be generated by such a deeply interconnected, interdisciplinary and transnational approach.

If quantitative analysis requires a critical mass to be accumulated by a database *before* it can generate any meaningful trend data, then the implications for these projects are obvious: we must expand the volume of stored data many times, before attempting to answer the bigger questions about the history of reading through the centuries. But when is enough data really sufficient to be representative across a long historical period? How long can we wait before asking and trying to answer (however speculatively) the key questions in the history of reading, such as whether a *Leserevolution* really took place in the late-eighteenth century? And is representativeness, like the man in the top hat sitting in the omnibus, nothing more than a convenient fiction? The detailed qualitative analysis of the close reading recorded in dairies, marginalia, manuscript material and correspondence often provides the greatest density of data in the history of reading, however anomalous the reader might be. Indeed, despite dozens of claims for exemplary, outstanding, remarkable or brilliantly self-sufficient readers, historians of reading have continued to draw upon these rare individuals who kept a detailed record of their reading. Perhaps the only satisfac-

tory answer, as we currently see in all these reading experience database projects, is to do both: to delve deep into the archive, but also to sweep broadly across many different types of material and sources of information from across the centuries.

I want to end with two final images, which I think illustrate some of the issues of recovering evidence and interpreting reading that I have discussed in this essay: first the often arbitrary nature of *how*, *why* and *where* the evidence of reading is recorded, and second, the issue of representativeness in recovering such a record. My essay is subtitled 'what do we do with the man in the hat?', but the answer to this question may sometimes be, not very much, for while the man in the hat is an emblematic representation of a reader, he may not be at all representative of the diversity of actual readers in any given historical period. The first of my two final images is perhaps the most famous visual representation of reading in the omnibus in the nineteenth-century, William Egley's 'Omnibus Life in London' (1859).

Image 4: William Egley (1826–1916), 'Omnibus Life in London' (1859), oil on canvas.

Image 5: Alfred Morgan (fl.1862–1904), 'An Omnibus Ride to Piccadilly Circus, Mr Gladstone travelling with ordinary people' (1885).

Egley's perspective deliberately accentuates the crowded metropolitan scene, with people and goods, and all manner of passengers, crammed into a particularly small space. Additional faces can be seen peering in, looking for somewhere to sit. There are at least two readers (and possibly more) depicted in Egley's painting: first of all, a young woman, the last figure seated on the right hand side of the omnibus, who is studiously engrossed in reading her book (it looks like a hardback, and possibly a volume from a lending library), and thereby presumably avoiding unnecessary eye contact with her fellow male passengers. The second possible reader is the red-haired man peering into the omnibus, his gaze seemingly focussed on the young woman's book. There are other potential readers in the omnibus, for the interior walls are plastered with advertisements, including text that the passengers could not help but read; the gaze of the woman in the red shawl is intently focussed on the text of the advertising hoarding opposite her. In Egley's painting, the men in hats inside the omnibus (there are four of them) are not engaged in reading, while at least two of the women inside the carriage possibly are; there are obvious reasons why women in public transport in the nineteenth-century would want to use reading material to avoid the gaze of male passengers. There are also evident reasons why such transient reading experiences have by and large not been recorded, and cannot be easily recovered from the archives (people

do not routinely keep records of their reading of advertising hoardings in situ, or of borrowed library volumes).

The second is a painting by Alfred Morgan from 1885 titled 'An Omnibus Ride to Piccadilly Circus: Mr Gladstone travelling with ordinary passengers'. Once again, a man in a hat (not a top hat, in this case) is clutching a newspaper, while the British Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone dressed as ever in black is resolutely not reading during his journey, but purposefully staring into the distance. The extraordinary irony here is that Gladstone was one of the most prolific readers ever recorded in the nineteenth-century. He owned over 32,000 books in his private library, many of which he marked with marginal notes, frequently read 3 books in a single day, and constantly referred to his reading in his correspondence. Gladstone's reading has been systematically recovered by the Gladstone Catalogue project (http://www.st-deiniols.com/library-collection/glad-cat/), and by scholars such as Ruth Windscheffel in her study *Reading Gladstone*; but the man in the hat clutching his disposable and biodegradable newspaper, one of his reading countrymen, has vanished entirely from the historical record.

NOTES

[1] For more information about the background to *UK RED*, its history, methodological rationale and future directions, please see the 'About UK RED' webpage (http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/about.php) and the background article by Simon Eliot, 'The Reading Experience Database' (Eliot), both accessed 23 March 2011.

[2] Vernon Lee's Commonplace books are housed in the Vernon Lee archive, Colby College Special Collections, Colby College, Waterville, Maine, USA. Evidence from this source is being entered into *UK RED*.

[3] Vernon Lee's books are housed in the Special Collections of the Harold Acton Library, The British Institute of Florence. Of the 425 extant books, 299 have marginalia, with the majority featuring considerable marking. Evidence from this source is being entered into *UK RED*.

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