

David Allan, *A Nation of Readers. The Lending Library in Georgian England*. London: British Library, 2008. xiii + 281 pp. ISBN: 978 0 7123 4967 3. £45.00.

*Reviewed by Patrick Spedding*

Allan's study of lending libraries in Georgian England is as widely and deeply researched as anyone could hope for. He seems to be familiar with every book club, reading society, subscription, circulating and parochial library in every hamlet in England. Allan's footnotes consist of references to a myriad of manuscript book- and membership-lists, to minutes of meetings of long-defunct clubs and institutions, and to printed catalogues held in long-overlooked libraries and archives. He has very clearly travelled the length and breadth of England and examined every surviving record of collective book ownership.

Allan's acquaintance with the scholarship in this area is almost as impressive as his familiarity with the primary material. The pioneering scholar of this subject is Paul Kaufman. Allan is generous in his praise of Kaufman. Where he differs in his interpretation of evidence from Kaufman, Richard Altick and others, he does so with respect and caution. Allan appears to be equally familiar with the ever-growing number of detailed studies of clubs and libraries published by an astonishing variety of local-history societies in journals with readerships as limited as their geographical purview.

Allan considers, in successive chapters, "Readers and Reading in Georgian England," "Book Clubs and Reading Societies," "The Subscription Libraries," "The Circulating Libraries," "Other Institutional Collections"—such as parish and cathedral libraries, civic, literary- and philosophical-society collections—and "Reading and the Making of a Polite Public." Each chapter is broken up into numbered sections, making the structure of Alan's narrative admirably clear.

Allan's thesis is that the consumption of texts was "integral to social standing" (2), but that print runs were short, books were expensive (25, 45, 93) and rare in the eighteenth century (25, 127) and that bookshops, particularly regional ones, kept few books in stock. He discusses the financial resources of readers, and the economies that result from the collective purchase and use of books (32). Allan argues that book clubs—and lending libraries—evolved partly to overcome these difficulties. I do not agree with this thesis and if so many members of the libraries Allan mentions were rich (32, 33, 35, 45, 210 etc), and had substantial book collections of their own (54), then it is not clear to me how the putative rarity and high price of books can explain their membership of such institutions.

Allan argues more plausibly that readers were also prompted to come together out of a genuine desire for social interaction. Most of the libraries Allan considers were "fundamentally associational both in ethos and in formal structure" (189). Some library structures were dominated by those with serious intellectual or religious interests (50–51, 54), others by those with frivolous or convivial interests (54, 88).

Allan argues that all types of associational structures, from book clubs with no permanent collection to substantial lending libraries that endure to this day in fine stone buildings, were far more numerous and diverse than any previous account has suggested. In this he is undoubtedly correct.

The strength of Allan's book is his account of, and the evidence he provides for, the numerous and diverse libraries he mentions, as well as the "extensive and energetic book borrowing experiences" (217) of the many readers who populate his history. By bringing together a wealth of primary material and scholarship previously known only to a few scholars he has provided a handy reference work that is likely to facilitate both the rapid proliferation of detailed case studies in this area and the writing of competing surveys such as his own.

Since my own shelves and filing cabinets are full of heavily-annotated copies of the books and articles by Kaufman, I ought to have loved Allan's book. Unfortunately, however, *A Nation of Readers* has a number of serious flaws. I will mention only four of these.

Allan's subtitle—*The Lending Library in Georgian England*—is simultaneously a misleading and a painfully accurate representation of this book. Allan says, concerning the various club- and institutional-libraries that he examines, that "variation rather than uniformity is the only rule that seems to have been generally observed by the eighteenth century" (172). Not surprisingly, therefore, Allan includes a variety of non-lending libraries in his discussion: book clubs with no permanent library, chained parochial libraries and a variety of non-circulating reference collections. Likewise, though the Georgian period extends from 1714 to 1830, the *vast* bulk of Allan's book concerns libraries and evidence from the early nineteenth-century. Indeed, since the material record seems to become exponentially richer in the years leading up to 1830, this book seems to be much more a study of *The Lending Library in Early Nineteenth-Century England* than in *Georgian England*.

The first of these observations is a mere quibble; and Allan is, in fact, quite consistent in excluding coffee-house libraries, university libraries and the libraries of the Inns of Court, etc., since none of these are *lending* libraries, as such. Likewise, the justification that Allan mounts concerning the second objection is plausible enough: material evidence is so sparse for the eighteenth century that, if we were to ignore the evidence of the early nineteenth century there would be little to say at all. Neither of these objections would be worth mentioning if it were not for the fact that Allan is *so* very inflexible in his interpretation of the final word of his title that the title as a whole is actually misleading, because Allan is *only* interested in England, not *primarily* England or even Britain, nor England and its colonies, nor England and its neighbours, nor England and its trading partners, nor England and anywhere else at all.

If Allan were to explain or attempt to justify this limitation, other scholars might regret or question his decision, but this unyielding accuracy of interpretation only becomes clear as one anticipates and then misses familiar examples of each

category of library. So, for example, Allan rehearses (125–26) a handful of provincial examples of commercial book lending in the early eighteenth-century as a prelude to “the sudden rash of circulating libraries that arose in the capital itself during the 1740s” (126). Missing from Allan’s list of examples is the well-known circulating library run by Allan Ramsay in Edinburgh in 1728. By the time the reader finds Allan regretting that “mechanics’ institutes’ library collections have never been explored in their own right” (195) it is clear that Allan *only* means mechanics’ institutes’ in England. Mechanics’ institutes’ library collections elsewhere could be the subject of unremitting academic attention, based on rich archival sources, but this statement would stand.

In fact, Allan regularly regrets the lack of information, and “the grossly uneven distribution of surviving” evidence, concerning different types of libraries (211), yet he totally ignores the evidence for the cultural phenomenon that he is examining if that evidence derives from examples outside of England. He is the proverbial man, with a candle in his hand, cursing the darkness. It is difficult to understand why, while Allan is prepared to gather evidence for what occurred in eighteenth-century York from London in the 1830s, he rarely even bothers to *dismiss* relevant examples from across Hadrian’s Wall (59 n43).

As readers become aware of this parochialism they might be tempted—as I was—to start looking for any mention of anywhere on the face of the globe outside of Allan’s sceptred isle. I only found two; more observing readers might find a few more. But nowhere does Allan consider examples of lending libraries outside of Britain: in British colonies, in Europe, or in North America. The reason seems to be his conviction that London was “the epicentre of English book trade and the point from which fashions and innovations most easily radiated outward across the rest of the country” (126) and England was “at the cutting edge of cultural change during this period” and, as a consequence, is “always a crucial test case” (227). Even when making such claims Allan seems unable to mention by name anywhere else—I cannot say “any other country” since Allan ignores two-thirds of Britain—that such “fashions and innovations” might have originated. This article of faith remains unexamined.

Another problem with this book is the failure of its author to discuss and adequately define any of the sociological categories he uses so frequently. On almost every page Allan attempts to make sense of evidence for the ownership and consumption of books in terms of individual and collective biography, broad social movements and emerging political philosophies. He discusses the varied characteristics of formal associations—convivial and commercial—in terms of financial resources, class markers, behaviour and aspirations. Allan says of the Liverpool Library, for example, that it “almost immediately became the creature of the polite and respectable professionals, traders and manufacturers who were such an important part of middle-class society in its host community” (66); four pages later he discusses “the obvious attractions of urban subscription libraries to the old

professions and propertied classes in particular” (70); a few pages later we are told of a subscription library “supported by a large proportion of the parish’s commercial and professional elite.’ Accordingly it can be classified as unambiguously ‘middle class’ in character” (72). On the same page, Allan discusses “the perceived needs of a strongly urban-focused bourgeoisie, as opposed to landed and titled readers” and an “urban and strongly middle-class form of culture.”

Although Allan does not explain what he means by any of these terms, his working definitions become clearer as the reader continues. The “old professions” are, it seems, the clergy, lawyers and doctors (not prostitutes and thieves); urban professionals are mercantile and industrial in character, etc. But in a study that is at least as much sociological as historical, and concerned with purchasing power and *social* movements such as associationalism, the failure to adopt and maintain a clearly-defined social schema is a serious flaw. (Compare Allan’s work to Joost Kloek, “Reconsidering the Reading Revolution,” *Poetics* 26 (1999) 289–307, and other publications emerging from the Utrecht research group on “Reading Culture”.)

Two other problems that I found with this book are at least partly the responsibility of the publisher: the copy-editing and the physical book itself. *A Nation of Readers* is elegantly printed on a very heavy art-paper; though it is only 280 pages the book weighs 1.1kg (the same as my *Bibliography of Eliza Haywood*, which is three times as long). If *A Nation of Readers* were full of beautiful illustrations then the decision to use a heavy art-paper might well have been justified, but there are only eighteen figures (and eight tables) in the book and these are so poorly reproduced that they could have been reproduced on newsprint (figure 2 is particularly poor).

Finally, *A Nation of Readers* would be a lot easier to read if Allan had been asked to break up some of his more convoluted sentences. Consider the following two examples:

By 1820, after little more than twenty years of operation, this institution too—whose origins lay ironically in some members’ apparent dissatisfaction with the expanded Liverpool Library and their desire to create a more congenial institution of their own, comprising a reference library and newsroom rather than a full circulating collection—had achieved an impressive membership of 502 men, among them several members of the soon-to-be-famous Gladstone family, and was already circulating duplicates to borrowers. (66)

Of seventy-three words in this sentence, only twenty belong to the main clause, twenty-five belong to a secondary clause, and twelve and nine to a further two passing observations. Over a hundred pages later, the reader is still ploughing through such sentences as this:

At Manchester, meanwhile, the Cross Street Chapel Library, established by the Unitarians three years later, informed its readers, many of whom were drawn from the town’s mercantile and professional elites—like the Heywood’s who were also heavily

implicated in the Portico Library—that ‘The books will be delivered every Sunday, half an hour after service, both in the morning and in the afternoon.’ (179)

Here we have eleven clauses, only four of which constitute the main thread introducing the quotation (“At Manchester ... the Cross Street Chapel Library ... informed its readers ... that ...”). Jammed in between these sentence-fragments are two tangential observations, one of which sports a tangent of its own (“like the Heywoods ...”). Too many such tangles occur throughout the text.

It is a shame that some of these minor observations are not more fully developed, and that others were not placed in appropriate footnotes. Unlike the text, however, the footnotes are spartan, almost gnomic. The reader is often left either wondering exactly what a particular citation is for, or looking for more information. Allan tells us that “James Leverton ... successfully argued that twenty-one important items should be acquired immediately from the London wholesalers” (86), but the footnote (114 n83) does not list any of these titles. Instead, the curious reader is greeted with three references, one of which is for a manuscript minute book. It is not clear whether the other two references contain a list of the items concerned, and only a resident of Truro, Cornwall, has the option of popping down to the Records Office to check the third. A few extra words in these footnotes could save scholars—at least those not resident in Truro—considerable labour.

Given the enormous research involved in producing this study, the richness of the evidence examined, and the importance of this evidence to our field, it is a shame that these issues were not identified and dealt with before publication.