ENGLISH CIRCULATING LIBRARIES, 1750-1800

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It was 1765, and Elizabeth Francis had gone to Margate, a fashionable watering-place of the times, to try sea-bathing for her health. Philip Francis, remaining at home, wrote to his wife and inquired how she amused herself at Margate. He voiced in his innocent question concerning the Margate library, an almost universal conception of circulating libraries: to him and to many who came after him, circulating libraries were places where people went to borrow "pretty books," books whose chief mission in this world consisted in nothing more important than whiling away somebody's idle hour. Those libraries were shops supplied by the hack-writer's pen, and patronized by uncritical readers who lacked a taste for things literary, and who were all too eager to devour the unpalatable books which had been prepared for their consumption. But is this a true picture of circulating libraries? And if it is a true picture, if circulating libraries really were the storehouses of trash which critics have said they were, just why were they popular? What reasons were there, either within the bookselling trade itself, or in the reading public, which led to the creation and popularity of this new commercial venture – the circulating library? It will be

1 The Francis Letters ..., edited by Beata Francis and Eliza Keary. London. v.1, p. 70.
the attempt of this paper to answer those questions, giving some consideration to the type of books found in circulating libraries, the kinds of readers who haunted the places, the libraries themselves, and the booksellers who owned the places.

Benjamin Franklin tells us that in 1725, when he lodged in Little Britain, he formed an agreement with a bookseller named Wilcox, to borrow and to read on reasonable terms whatever books he desired. He adds that "circulating libraries were not then in use." Franklin was really right when he said that circulating libraries were not in use: the heyday of their glory had not yet arrived. But one must not assume that they had never existed before this time, because they had. An occasional bookseller, with a little more foresight than his fellows, probably had the happy inspiration to lend books at certain rates to his more reliable customers. But such instances were rare and existed only as isolated examples of unusual shrewdness on the part of a few men. It was not until the second quarter of the eighteenth century that the idea of lending books condensed itself into a conscious, well-regulated business venture, and not until the second half of the eighteenth century that the circulating library really came into its own.

Much has been said about the origin of these libraries. Towns, aware of and proud of whatever pretensions they might possess, have put forth their claims to being first in the establishment of such libraries until the list of firsts has grown to a most puzzling number.

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1*Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, collected and edited by Albert Henry Smyth. N. Y. 1907. v.1, p. 278
It is probably true as has been asserted that circulating libraries started their career, not in London, but in the provinces. According to the editor of Notes and Queries, Dunfermline, Scotland leads the list with a library established as early as 1711, but it is probable that earlier ones than this existed from time to time, and passed into oblivion without causing much of a flurry. Allan Ramsay, according to the same source, claims the honor of being second with a library established in 1725, but Plomer, who dates the establishment of Allan Ramsay's library from 1726, puts forth a claim for Bath, with a library begun by one Benjamin Matthews in 1725. Plomer fails, however, to give any evidence for his assumption, prior to the advertisement of 1755 which occurred in the Bath Chronicle, and which mentioned the fact that Matthews kept a circulating library. In 1728 Bristol was enjoying a new library founded by Thomas Sendall in Wine Street. Circulating libraries did not begin to flourish well in London until the 1740's. Plomer gives us the questionable date of 1739 for the opening of a library by Francis and John Noble in Holborn, but the Nobles are not known to have had a library before 1745. This library, one of the earliest, if not the earliest in

1 C. P. p. 442. Not enough information has been given about this library for us to form any idea of its character. It might, or it might not have been, a true circulating library.

2 Ibid.


4 Ibid., p. 222.

5 Ibid., p. 152

Loudon had an interesting history and deserves some comment. In 1746, the Nobles issued a catalogue which showed that they specialized in children’s books, and that they also dealt in second-hand books. Defoe’s second edition of the Journal of the Plague was re-published in 1754 as the History of the Great Plague in London, and was "printed and sold by F. and J. Noble at their Circulating Libraries in King Street, Covent Garden, and in St. Martin’s Court near Leicester Square."2 The two Nobles did not always publish together, and in 1752 they formed separate establishments.3 Plomer gives their addresses in 1775 as "F. Noble, Middle Row, Holborn, and J. Noble, St. Martin’s Court, near Leicester Fields." I have recently examined a book which gives them the same addresses mentioned by Plomer, but which was published in 1768.4 Francis Noble in his later years retired from business when his daughter won a thirty thousand pound prize. He died in Kentish town in 1792.5 I am not able to account for the later years of John Noble.6 There was still another Noble, a Samuel Noble, who ran a

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1 Plomer, Dictionary, p. 182.
3 Alan Dugald McIllop, loc. cit., p. 463.
4 The Perplexed Lovers, or, The History of Sir Edward Balchen, Bart. In three vols., London, Printed • • • for Francis Noble, at his Circulating Library, near Middle-Rew, Holborn; and John Noble, at his Circulating Library, in St. Martin’s Court, near Leicester Square, 1768.
6 J. H. S. Tompkins, The Popular Novel in England, 1770-1800, London, 1932 says that the Nobles were taken to task by the reviewers of the day for the immoral character of their books. She quotes from various sources, but she believes that while the Nobles appeared to wax indignant over the charges, they really found them an excellent sort of
circulating library in Carnaby Street somewhere around 1775, but his relationship to Francis and John has remained ambiguous.\footnote{Wright, with his library established in 1740, and Samuel Fancourt, with a business which dated from 1740 or 1745, are other contenders for the somewhat dubious honor of being first in a new enterprise, as is also Mr. Bathoe, who really just continued the management of the library which had already been started by Wright.}

Regardless of where or how circulating libraries began, they made rapid progress, and it was not long until a circulating library was considered by more people than Sir Anthony Absolute, "an evergreen tree of diabolical knowledge."\footnote{At first the libraries seem to have caused some alarm among the booksellers themselves who feared that if people were content to borrow books they would forget to buy them. Experience soon proved, however, that this fear was groundless. Instead, the hunger for reading grew, and one bookseller was led to remark that thousands of books were purchased every year by people.}

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One of their novels, *The Way to Lose Him*, was characterized by the *London* as "very proper to debauch all young women who are still undaubched," and another novel, *The Way to Please Him*, was disposed of with a brief: "See the last article. The same character will do for both." p. 14.

who had first borrowed them from the libraries, and from their reading of them, formed such a liking for the books that they had decided to buy and own them. The same writer tells us that even the country people who at an earlier date had been content to spend their long winter evenings by the fireside exchanging tales of ghosts, witches, and hobgoblins, now listen eagerly as their sons and daughters read tales and romances aloud to the family gathered around them. In the homes of these people one may find such books as *Tom Jones*, *Roderick Random*, and others equally interesting, "stuck up on their bacon racks." And if son John carries a load of hay to town, he dares not return to his family until he has obtained the *Peregrine Pickle* which they have asked him to bring home with him; or if Dolly goes to market with eggs to sell, she returns with the *History of Pamela Andrews*. Lackington notes the increasing interest in circulating libraries among women, a fact which he, unlike his more gloomy contemporaries, approves of as a good thing for the "cultivation of the other sex." William Hutton also comments on this early popularity of circulating libraries among women: "As I hired out books the fair sex did not neglect the shop." The *Annual Register* in 1761, commenting on the refinement of manners in the country, says that "the reading female hires her novels from some country circulating library, which consists of about an hundred volumes."

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2 Ibid., pp. 420-421.

3 Ibid., p. 422.

4 N. & Q., 6.5 v. 7, p. 452.

5 ... p. 207.
The reading female could not have found circulating libraries so easy
to use had not those libraries enjoyed a profitable growth in those few
years between 1725 and 1760. Reading could no longer be considered an art
peculiar to the upper-classes of the city, nor could coffee-houses claim
the sole glory of being the social centers of their communities. Books
were beginning to mean something more to the people of this day than they
did to Southey's Daniel Dove, who felt that "a book carried with it
authority in its very aspect."

We know that Cambridge had a library by 1745, started by Robert Watts,
who catered to the needs of the university students, whom he supplied with
mathematical and classical textbooks by subscription. He was called "Maps,"
a name which he had gained through his habit of announcing himself at each
door by calling "Maps." When he died in 1752, his son-in-law, John
Nicholson, inherited his title as well as his trade. Nicholson did not
confine his books-in-trade to textbooks, but he also possessed some of the
best and rarest authors in several branches of literature, which he
loaned to students at a low subscription rate. He went further in dis-
playing his generosity, by permitting the free use of his library to those
students who were too poor to subscribe even to the moderate charge he
asked. This library at Cambridge, managed first by Watts and then by
Nicholson, was, however, an unusual library, as it was established pri-
marily to meet the demands of university students.

Newcastle-on-Tyne, which was not far behind Cambridge in the establish-
ment of a library, had, perhaps, a more typical one. It claimed a library

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1 Dictionary National Biography; Plomer, Dictionary, p. 256
2 W. H. Nichols, Literary Anecdotes, v. 1, p. 693
3 D. N. B.
started by Joseph Barber in 1746 as its first venture. In 1757 he had
1257 volumes, and on the appearance of a rival in William Charnley, who
offered in that year the loan of books to the public at 1 s. a year or
3 s. a quarter, he announced his annual subscription at 10 s. per year or
a crown per quarter. Birmingham had a library in 1751 opened by William
Hutton (1723-1815), another interesting character in the bookselling trade.
He was the son of a master wool comber, and as his father was poor, he
received very little formal schooling. At the age of seven he was an
apprentice in a silk mill in Derby; at the age of fourteen he was a stocking-
maker. He became interested in books and taught himself how to bind them.
In 1750 he opened a bookshop in Birmingham, although the town already had
three bookstores. The following year he started his library.

A library was opened at Liverpool in 1757; Manchester is said to
have had one opened the same year, although its records date only from 1765.
Dover had one founded by Peter Newport in 1760, and Glasgow had one founded
by John Smith in the same year, which loaned books at the rate of "ten
shillings per year, five shillings and sixpence per half-year, three shill-
ings per quarter, sixpence per month, and one penny per night. Every new
performance on amusing and instructive subjects will be added to the library
immediately on publication." We have little doubt as to the type of customer
solicited by Mr. Smith - "now," "amusing," and "instructive" are clue words

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1 N & Q., s. 5 v. 8, p. 155
2 D. N. B.
3 N & Q., s. 5, v. 7, p. 354
4 Plomor, Dictionary, p. 179
5 Ibid., p. 354
which throw light on the kind of books handled.

Brighton, not to be outdone, claimed a library opened by E. Baker in 1760.\(^1\) A library in Tunbridge Wells owned by a Mr. Baker was destroyed the following year by fire.\(^2\) According to Lewis Melville, a Mr. A. M. Broadley possesses book-plates of the libraries of a Knight and an E. Baker of Tunbridge Wells.\(^3\) This evidence shows us that Mr. Baker was an enterprising soul who was not content to confine his book-lending activities to any one place.

There was a library in Worthing in 1760;\(^4\) there was one in 1763 in Barnstaple, owned by Fidelio Murch.\(^5\) Rockdale had a library begun in 1770, which lasted until 1877, in which year its collection of books was sold by auction; Settle also had a library started in 1770.\(^6\) In 1760, James Simons, a printer in Canterbury, went into partnership with George Kirby and started a circulating library in that town.\(^7\) In the same year Exeter had a library owned by a Mr. Dyer.\(^8\)

This list makes no pretense to being a complete record of provincial circulating libraries which sprang up after 1750. There were others, but I have merely listed those which I have encountered from time to time in my reading. In the meantime London and Edinburgh were acquiring a few more libraries. In 1755 John Fuller in "The Director, or Young Woman's

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\(^2\) N. & Q., 5 v. 1, p. 155.

\(^3\) Lewis Melville, Society at Royal Tunbridge Wells in the 18th Century ... London. 1881, p. 119.

\(^4\) N. & Q., 5 v. 7, p. 45.

\(^5\) Plomer, Dictionary, p. 177

\(^6\) N. & Q., 5 v. 7, p. 113

\(^7\) Plomer, Dictionary, p. 329

\(^8\) N. & Q., 5 v. 8, p. 155
Boot Companion, a volume of cookery and medical recipes," advertised a lending library.1 In the following year, 1756, Thomas Lounds, remembered particularly for his publication of Fanny Burney's Evelina, started his library in Fleet Street.2 In 1765, A. Cooke had a circulating library in Haining Lane, Fenchurch Street.3 About 1770 Samuel James had a library at the Bible in Gutter Lane, Cheapside; Thomas Hookham had one in New Bond Street, somewhere between 1772-1775; C. Rice about 1775 had one in Berkeley Square, and Samuel Noble about the same time had a library at the Pope's Head, in Carnaby Street.4

In Edinburgh John Yair purchased Allan Ramsay's circulating library in 1757. He died in 1764, and his widow, Margaret Yair,5 continued to manage this outstanding library until 1779, in which year she sold it to Charles Elliot. Elliot was quick to inform the public that at his library one might find magazines and reviews, and that he was supplied with "nearly one hundred newspapers weekly, some of which are carefully preserved, but the greater part is sold at low prices second-hand."6 In 1779 James Sibbald, an acquaintance of Elliot's, began to serve a free apprenticeship under Elliot, and in 1780 he was ready to set up a shop of his own. He bought

1 Plomer, Dictionary, p. 98
2 Ibid., p. 159. The T. Lounds who opened a library in Change Court in 1751 (McKillop, "Circulating Libraries, 1725-1750," Library, v. 14, p. 453) seems to have been a different person.
3 Ibid., p. 59
4 Plomer, Dictionary, pp. 139, 131, 210, 182
5 Ibid., p. 370
6 Ibid., p. 304
Elliot's circulating library and soon proved himself a notable proprietor of an equally notable library. ¹ Sibbald (1745-1803) was the son of a farmer and during his early years had followed farming. Soon, however, under the tutelage of Charles Elliot, he turned his attention to books. He established the Edinburgh Magazine in 1763, and he became the editor of the Edinburgh Herald in 1792.

Allan Ramsay's long-lived library was not the only one in Edinburgh. In 1758 William Gray offered the public "at his circulating library in the front of the east wing of the Exchange in future six of the London magazines and three of its newspapers ready for the perusal of the citizens who are willing to pay 2 s. per quarter for the privilege."² This must have been an inducement indeed to the reading population of Edinburgh.

I have given a brief summary of the history of circulating libraries from 1750-1800. When one remembers Lecky's statement that in 1800 England had 1000 circulating libraries,³ he begins to see the futility of trying to trace the history of even the most popular libraries. He must be contented to piece together the few facts available, admitting all the while that the facts are meagre, and at times not altogether trustworthy.

The new business of operating circulating libraries was probably the result of a happy inspiration, as have been most of the inventions or innovations of our civilization. One critic says of them:

"From the novel to the circulating library is but a step, since

² Plomer, Dictionary, p. 315.
fiction has been the main-stay and possibly the creation of the popular library. At least it is a striking testimony to their close connection that the appearance of Pamela and the establishment of the circulating library coincided.\(^1\)

The popularity of Pamela (1740) might have had and very likely did have the privilege of giving an impetus to the growth of circulating libraries, but it cannot be said that Pamela was responsible for their very being. The libraries were already in existence, and the publication of Pamela, which heralded a new dawn for the novel, only helped along a thing which had already started its growth and which was merely awaiting a propitious time to burst into full flower. Pamela and the hundreds of novels which followed in its wake were only, so to speak, the rain drops which watered the earth that the plant might flourish.

It has also been suggested that the libraries might have owed their birth and growth to the increasing and annoying presence of stall-readers, who brought no money to the poor worried bookseller, but who at the same time indulged their literary appetite at his expense. Or they might have owed their origin to the prohibitive price of books. Of course, this would account for the large number of stall-readers. The eighteenth century was not backward in printing books, but the actual price of books was still beyond the reach of poorer people who wanted to read. The average volume covered with a paper cover cost about 2 s. 6 d. When one remembers that novels were seldom less than two volumes in length, and were more often six or eight volumes long, he can well-understand the dilemma in which the poorer

\(^1\) A. S. Collins, Authorship in the Days of Johnson. 1927. p. 245.
class of reader found himself. A novel might cost from five to twenty
shillings, and reading, at twenty shillings a novel, was indeed a luxury
that the poor could ill afford.¹

One solution to the problem was the use of circulating libraries.
They in turn, as Lackington remarked, stimulated reading to such an extent
that they whetted the desire of people to possess books. And when the demand
for books grew, books could be published in greater quantities and at cheaper
prices. But before this happened, the poorer reader, who could not purchase
a ten-volume novel, could afford to borrow it from a circulating library for
a penny or 80 per day; or if he were wise enough to take advantage of the
offer, he might subscribe for a year's reading at the rate of 10 s. or 12 s.
per year. Subscription rates, of course, varied. Wright at the sign of the
Bible in Exeter Exchange, Strand, as early as 1743 was lending books at the
rate of 16 / - per year. ² Samuel Fancourt at about the same time asked a
guinea a year for the privilege of reading his books.³ Francis Noble's
trade card from his "Circulating Library at Otway's Head in King Street,
Covent Garden" says that "books are lent to read ... at half a guinea a
year."⁴ The trade card is without a date, but the costumes on it place it
as about 1745. Willoughby Minors or Mynors in 1744 at his shop in Clare Court,
Drury Lane asked a half-guinea a year for the service of his books, or
3 £. a quarter. He even placed a limit on the number of books lent to one
person, allowing that person only two volumes at one time.⁵ James Leake,

¹ Tomkin, The Popular Novel in England, p. 10-11; Esther McGill "The Ever-
green Tree of Diabolical Knowledge" Bookman v. 73, p. 266.
³ Gentleman's Magazine, v. 54.1, p. 273
⁵ Plomer, Dictionary, p. 173.
according to a book begun by Daniel Defoe and continued by Samuel Richardson, kept "one of the finest Bookseller's Shops in Europe" where one might subscribe for agreeable books at 5 c. a season. Richardson's opinion of the "fine shop" could have been a prejudiced one, as Leake was his brother-in-law, but we find his statement repeated by Count Frederick Killmanseggo, a foreign visitor, who also mentions the "fine bookseller's shop, where everybody, on arrival can subscribe five shillings for the whole season," and who adds that "it brings to the bookseller Leake, a large profit, as he receives nearly as many shillings as there are visitors in Bath." Plomer leaves us rather a bad impression of Leake when he quotes a letter from the Earl of Ossory to Councillor Kemp, (Hist. Soc. Commercial): "He is the Prince of all the Coxcomical fraternity of booksellers; and not having any learning himself, he seems resolved to sell it as dear as possible to others."

Lydia Molford while in Bath writes to her dear friend, Miss Hillis at Gloucester, that while she has not been permitted to go to the ladies' coffeehouse where she would be exposed to gossip concerning politics, scandal, philosophy and other subjects "above her capacity," she has been permitted to visit the bookseller's shops, "charming places of resort, where we read novels, plays, pamphlets, and newspapers for so small a subscription as a crown a quarter and listen to a discussion of all the reports of the day, and all the private transactions of the both." The enjoyment of the social life at Bath was dependent almost entirely on one's ability to pay the subscription

1 A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain ... 7th ed. London. 1769, v. 2, p. 214.
2 Count Frederick Killmanseggo, Diary of a Journey to England in the Years 1761-1766. London. 1802, p. 123.
3 Plomer, Dictionary, p. 152
rates demanded by the various attractions. 1

In 1763 John Smith of Glasgow issued a detailed statement of the subscription rates that would have to be paid at his library. These rates were, as mentioned before, 10 s. per year, 5 s. 6 d. per half-year, 3 s. per quarter, 1 s. 6 d. per month and 1 d. per night. This was the same John Smith who informed the public that he would add to his library "every new performance on amusing or instructive subjects ... immediately on publication." 2

Original shares in the Manchester subscription library were announced as 10 s. each and the annual subscription as 6 s. Later the entrance fee was raised to 10 guineas, the annual subscription fee to one guinea. 3 In 1771 Charles Frost in Chelsmford announced some subscription rates which were a bit higher than those of John Smith — 16 s. per year.

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1 "After the family is thus welcomed to Bath, it is the custom of the master of it to go to the public places, and subscribe two guineas, at the assembly houses towards the balls and music in the pump-house, for which he is entitled to three tickets every ball-night. His next subscription is a crown, half-a-guinea, or a guinea, according to his rank and quality, for the liberty of walking in the private walks belonging to Simpson's assembly-house; a crown or half-a guinea is also given to the booksellers, for which the gentleman is to have what books he pleases to read at his lodgings ... The ladies, too, may subscribe to the bookseller, and to a house by the pump-room, for the advantage of reading the news, and for enjoying each other's conversation." Oliver Goldsmith, "Life of Richard Nash" Works. London. 1901, v. 4, p. 73.

2 Plomor, Dictionary, p. 354

3 N. & Q., s. 5, v. 7, p. 452.
5 s. per quarter, and 3 d. per volume. In the same year, according to a book, entitled The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification, by the Rev. Walter Marshall, Alexander M'Cullan or M'Aslan lent "Religious, instructive and entertaining books ... at 10 s. per year, 5 s. 6 d. per half-year, 3 s. per quarter, 1 d. 6 d. per month, or one penny per night."—exactly the same rates offered by John Smith of Glasgow in 1763. As I said before, rates varied, due probably to local situations involving competition between rivals, demand by the readers for books and the type of books offered. The general rate, however, seems to have been about 10 s. or 12 s. per year, and 5 s. or 6 s. per half-year. Thomas Campbell's statement that he paid only 1 s. for a whole year's reading sounds almost too good to be true. I find myself inclined to doubt his exactness in recalling the rate.

Circulating libraries had a particularly luxuriant growth in the watering-places of the kingdom. Bath, Brighton, Margate, Duxton and Tunbridge Wells abound with records of their popularity. The novel as a form of literary art had received new strength from the creations of Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, and Sterne. Each of these men had his disciples; both among authors and among readers. The authors, many of them poor followers of their masters, found a novel-conscious public throughout England, but particularly in the pleasure-haunts of the island. Men and women with time on their hands, wanted then as now to be amused. Their appetite for books was not particularly from squeamish so long as those books held their attention and kept them dozing in their chairs.

1 Plomer, Dictionary, p. 96.
2 Ibid., p. 326.
3 Collins, Authorship in the Days of Johnson, p. 246.
As the watering-places were favorite haunts, particularly of women who wanted "to "keep up with the Joneses," or as they called it in those days, to be in "ton," and as Richardson with his delicate sentiment and his knowledge of a woman's heart appealed more to women than did the more realistic Fielding or Smollett, we are not surprised to find that sentimental novels led in popularity in most of the libraries. One writer speaks thus of the sentiment demanded by the readers:

"Say ye who best can tell, ye Bookseller; what would become of all our Journeys, our Lucubrations, our Peregrinations, our Plays, our Novels, our Romances, which are daily showered down in such plenty on our thrice happy land, did they not contain this manna, this light aerial heavenly food? Would they not be repudiated by the most voracious appetite that ever devoured a circulating library? Would they not soon be turned into thread-paper, or be found at the bottom of all the pastry in the nation?"¹ Dr. Twining wrote to Dr. Burney about Cecilia, which he had obtained from a library and which was such a wonderful book that it had "drawn iron tears down cheeks that were never wet with pity before."² He tells of two old maiden ladies of Colchester, "sensible and accomplished women" — somehow, one doubts this — who wept so bitterly upon reading Cecilia that they had been obliged to cancel a dinner engagement; their eyes were so red and their noses so swelled from intemperate weeping.²

Pope, a bookseller in a popular novel of the day, in instructing his

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¹ Thos. Cogan, John Bunce, Junior, Gentleman. London. 1776, p. 82

hack-writer as to the kind of books he wants, knows exactly what will please his readers: "Tears, tears, Mr. Web, misce must cry, or it's nothing; write for the white handkerchief, dear Web, dear Web, can you love me -- "

A scene from a bookseller's shop in Buxton further illustrates this point. Mr. Homespun, a poor bookish man on a vacation, blunders into a bookseller's shop, asks for reviews, for magazines, for philosophy, morals and lectures, and is told in each case that the shop does not have what he wants. He finds, instead, Clelie, Cassandra, Pamela, the Adventures of Cleopatra, Amusement at the German Spa and the History of an Actress. As he is about to leave the shop in despair, he meets a party of women at the door, among whom he sees his wife. The women ask for Julia Hamberville. It is out. They want Sydney Biddulph. It too is out. One woman decides to read the Mistakes of the Heart. Mr. Homespun's wife then wishes that she had Joseph Andrews. She is immediately met by a horrified protest from the other women. What! Read such low stuff! "The adventures of a footman, a kitchen-wench, and a strolling parson!" Mr. Homespun is certainly joking! The ladies finally decide that if the Mistakes of the Heart is not to be had, they will substitute Tom Jones which is tolerable enough," according to a pale languid lady, "if he would but say more about the seraphic Sophia, and give us less nonsense about the old vulgar father, the dusty aunt, and those unintertaining horrid creatures, Thwackum and Square. He is shockingly tedious about those fellows. As to his Introductory Chapters, as he calls them, I always skip 'em. Aye, Madam, said another, if he were a little pleiner in telling us what to

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1 S. J. Pratt, Family Secrets v. 1 p. 390.
expect, at the top of his chapters, it would be a *goodish, prettily* sort of a novel, to *read once*.” But *Tom Jones*, alas, was being read by Lady Sallow’s coachman. The ladies finally went into ecstasies over *Delicate Embarrassments, Each Fox in Their Humour, Something New*, and *Eloisa*, which they requested the bookseller to send home.¹ It might not be amiss to note that the copy of *Eloisa* obtained from the Buxton circulating library lived up to the character usually ascribed to circulating library books. Mrs. Homespun read it, was influenced by its philosophy and surrendered her virtue to her lover, Philip Sedley. A little matter like a husband whom she might have wronged failed to bother her: “As to matrimonial shackles, I say with Eloisa, ‘Curse on all love but those which Love hath made!’”²

*Tom Jones*, in spite of the fact that it seemed unpopular when placed in competition with the *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, type of novel, not only found its way into circulating libraries soon after its publication, but also won for itself the approval of a larger group of readers than appears to be the case. Aaron Hill’s daughters obtained it as early as 1749 from a peddling bookseller and enjoyed it, perhaps to the amazement of Richardson, who considered them his unquestioning worshippers.³

It was still considered, however, a bit vulgar to acknowledge in polite circles a liking for such a hero as *Tom Jones*. A lady might read *Tom Jones* and enjoy it. That was her own business. But it wasn’t proper to conceive too great a liking for the book. It was just a little bit *indelicate* —

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³ Clara Linklater Thomson, *Samuel Richardson*. London. 1900, p. 82.
not quite lady-like — to admit that she cherished a fondness for such a hero as Tom, and if people asked her what she thought of Fielding, the proper thing for her to do was to appear horrified or ignorant — just whichever reaction suited her personality. Sir Charles Grandison remained, on the surface at least, the pattern of the ideal gentleman, and when Hannah More alluded to *Tom Jones*, in one of her conversations with Johnson, she found herself the object of a severe reproof:

"I never saw Johnson really angry with me but once; and his displeasure did him so much honour that I loved him the better for it. I alluded rather flippantly, I fear, to some witty passage in 'Tom Jones' he replied, 'I am shocked to hear you quote from so vicious a book. I am sorry to hear you have read it, a confession which no modest lady should ever make. I scarcely know a more corrupt work."¹

Johnson was perhaps a little too narrow in his criticism, especially in denying to Fielding any merit whatever, and in ending his reproof by breaking out into a fervent praise of Richardson as a literary artist. Could Johnson only have seen into the future, he would have harbored no fears as to the final pattern of Miss More's moral outlook. In her later days she was as strong a Richardsonian as Johnson, or even Samuel Richardson himself, could have desired her to be.

I have already touched slightly on the bookselling trade in Bath, especially in connection with the career of James Lefcoe. Monkland cherished as a favorite childhood memory the mental picture of Bull's Circulating Library

in Bath. 1 Fanny Burney also had at least a speaking acquaintance with this
library, but she does not tell us that she ever borrowed any books from it.2
S. J. Pratt, who has left us some of our most delightful gossip concerning the
book business, once conducted a circulating library in partnership with a man
named Clinch. Pratt (1740-1814) was one of those restless souls who refused
to stay in one place doing one thing for any length of time. He was first in
the church. Tiring of this calling, he gave himself another name, Courtney
Melbourne, and took to the stage. He first appeared in Snock Alley, Dublin, as
Marc Antony in All for Love. In 1774 he turned up in Covent Garden, playing
the parts of Hamlet and Philaster. In 1776, he was in Bath, lending books and
storing up in his memory those vivid side-lights on the popular books of the
day, and the types of readers who called for those books. His comment are
so pointed, and at the same time so real, that one can almost see Pratt,
jetting down his impression of such and such a reader after that reader had
taken his leave of the library, bearing away with him a supply of reading-
matter. Pratt's career as a book-ller-librarian was a short-lived venture,
although he remained nominally a partner in the business after Clinch's death.
He soon left Bath and went to London. In 1802 Pratt was in Birmingham, in-

1 C. Monkland, Literature and Literati of Bath. Bath, 1854, pp. 37-38

"Afterward, Upham, and eventually swept away by the modern buildings, which
range just opposite to the present Library Institution."

to Bull, the book-ller, brought word this morning that much laughter has been
made by the military among the mob." (Concerning a mob uprising against
papist and papist sympathisers.)
quiring after its manufactures and the lives of its working-men. Throughout his life he found time to write. Both novels and poetry flowed from his pen, no doubt finding a haven on the shelves of those circulating libraries he knew so well.¹

William Frederick, another Bath bookseller, has left very little of himself in the memory of his survivors, beyond the fact that he operated one of the most important libraries in that town during the latter half of the eighteenth century. He is said to have been a pupil of James Leake, but no evidence has yet been brought forward to prove this.² In Sheridan's Rivals (1775), Lydia Languish's maid visits the libraries of both Bull and Frederick.³

There was also an M. Bally, who continued her husband's bookselling trade at his death in 1774, and who "opened a circulating library and reading room, where in addition to all the London and provincial newspapers, readers might consult Faulknor's Dublin Journal." This library is known to have lasted until 1778.⁴

The Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain (1769) tells us of another watering-place which had become a "polite place." Brightholmestone, or Brighton as it was also called, was a fashionable pleasure resort during the summer season, having as one of its chief recommendations its accessibility from London. At this place "the

¹ Plomer, Dictionary, p. 97.
² Plomer, Dictionary, p. 97.
⁴ Plomer, op. cit., p. 15.
Gentry may also have the use of two circulating libraries, by which means the inhabitants have of late years been greatly benefited, and the provisions in that neighborhood greatly advanced in their price. Here at last we find a use for circulating libraries, even if that use extends no further than the economic betterment of the neighborhoods in which they are located. In 1799 the town of Brighton had three libraries as we learn from Bishop Percy, who writes to Jane West, stating that these three libraries are so popular that he has almost found it impossible to obtain her newest book in any of them.

I have already described at some length a scene in the Buxton Library in which a party of women try to find the right sentimental book to read. Mr. Homespun's comment on that library would probably not coincide with the opinion of his wife or her friends: "--Alas! the bookseller of Buxton has nothing in his shop but the trash that circulates at a watering-place amongst the women."

As for Margate, another summer resort, we know that Samuel Silver opened a circulating library and register office for lodgings in Cecil Square in 1773. This venture for some reason did not thrive, as Mr. Silver became bankrupt in 1776, according to an advertisement in the Kentish Gazette of June eighth; and all persons owing him money were instructed to pay their bills to Mr. Sawkins, attorney at law.

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Just what relationship existed between this Mr. Silver and another Mr. Silver who ran a toy-shop-library-lounging room in the same town in 1795, I am unprepared to state.\textsuperscript{2}

Harriot Francis in a letter to Mary Johnson in 1793 signifies her approval of at least one Margate library: "... our House is in the Church Field, it is immediately opposite to the principal Library which besides being a good collection of Books is the fashionable Lounge every morning from twelve to four."\textsuperscript{3}

When one runs across a statement like the following he is tempted to grow philosophical on the subject of how little human nature really changes with the passing years! "... when I go to Margate, it's for the sake of the raffling, the dancing, and the card-playing! --and what with being in the room all the morning, and in the libraries all the evening, curse me if I think I ever saw the sea!"\textsuperscript{4}

Testimony similar to that which has been given for the libraries in Margate can be found for Tunbridge Wells. A gentleman writes to his friend in town:

"Then there is the Bookseller's Shop, kept by a very facetious, intelligent Man, where you subscribe as to the great Rooms, have what Books you please home to your Lodging to read, and there being a great and well-chosen Variety, I found it particularly useful and agreeable to me in bad weather."\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{1} Plomer, op. cit., p. 228.
\textsuperscript{2} John Ashton, Old Times, London, 1885, p. 324.
\textsuperscript{5} Lewis Holvillo, Society at Royal Tunbridge Wells in the Eighteenth Century, 1912, p. 217.
The writer fails to mention just what purpose the library served in sunny weather. It is an amusing pastime to attempt to picture the reading habits of a "bad weather" reader. He probably began, like Mr. Page's customers, at the end of his book, came back to the title, skipped the preface and other parts of the book he found uninteresring, glanced at the end again and was ready for another volume.¹

We are told that Tunbridge Wells in the latter half of the Eighteenth century had two libraries: J. Sprange was proprietor of one and a bookseller named Nash owned the other.²

I have as yet said nothing about the trade of the bookseller-librarian, which was really a strange and puzzling one. In his handling of books, as in the performance of his various other duties, the bookseller had his tricks and was not averse to springing them on a credulous public. It was all a part of the game anyway. Readers were just waiting open-mouthed for something new and unusual in the books they read. The bookseller with his hand on the pulse of the reading public was quick to observe any significant change or reaction to various kinds of reading-matter and he was quick to turn to his advantage the things he learned about books and readers. "Books have their time as well as cucumbers." The bookseller knew that the summer readers at the watering-places were not serious readers. He reserved for their consumption his lighter books. If he had anything of real value to publish, he reserved it "for a spring and winter trade," for the people

who would be just as apt to read at home as at Bath or Brighton. And he saw to it that, regardless of whether it were winter or summer, his books would appear new. If the book failed to sell the first time or to catch the wandering eye of a prospective reader, he had as many as ten title-pages that but wanted a book; and what could be simpler than to give an old book a new name and send it forth again into the world to make its fortune? And if the public took a fancy to an old book with a new title, why the public was right. "I always let the vulgar direct me; whenever popular clamour arises, I always echo the million."^1

Horace Walpole notes this tendency in booksellers when he writes to Hannah More in 1788:

"This age, too, deals so much in false coinage, that booksellers and Birmingham give equal vent to what is not sterling; with the only difference, that the shillings of the latter pretend the names are effaced, and the wares of the former pass under borrowed names."^2

A book written by an author who has already gained for himself a respectable reading-public is often presented to the public without much fuss or flurry. If it is a solid work, the character of the author's previous publications is an ample recommendation for the sale of the new book. If however, the author is a new writer, and if the bookseller has deigned to accept his book, he has to do something to make the book popular with the public. Sometimes a little mystery about the new book helps. The writer keeps his identity hidden, or if he gives out any information at all, it goes no further than to the

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listing of his degrees or offices after an informative name, such as the 
Learned or the Ingenious. Then of course, there is the book I 
have already mentioned, the one designed for light summer reading. It 
is "to be devoured immediately--like a morning-paper, or a hot-roll." 
For a book of this sort, the title is the important thing, and it does-

n't have to deal at all with the contents of the book; as a matter of 

fact, if it can create curiosity without divulging any information 

whatever as to the contents--so much the better. "Titles of this 

sort are admirably adapted to Circulating libraries: every pretty 
nice sends for them with impatience, and reads them with avidity ... 

Something New. Did you ever see such damned stuff: Agreeable Ugliness, 

Lucky Disaster etc." When all such methods as mysterious or allitera-
tive titles, ambiguous authorship, or dressed-up title-pages fail, 
than the bookseller boldly reprints the title-page of an old, unpopu-
lar book, and calls it the Second Edition, corrected and improved. For 
as the bookseller well knows, some people show no interest in a book 
which has failed to go through two or three editions.¹ 

Another ingenious trick from the bookseller's bag was his 
system of advertising. We sometimes delude ourselves into believing 
that our own age started something when the advertiser and the psy-
chologist pooled their interests and set up a seige against an unsus-
pecting public. The booksellers of the eighteenth century probably 
know nothing about psychology as such, but they did know their trade 
and they knew their public. G. Allen who operated a circulating li-

brary in St. Martin's Lane published in 1786 an edition of Lord Win-

¹ [Cogan], John Buncle Junior, Gentleman, 1776, pp. 8-14.
worth; or the Memoirs of an Heir, which he had previously advertised, not only at the end of other works, but within the very body of those works. In Edward and Harriot; or the Happy Recovery the heroine ended a letter to a friend of hers with the promise to send her the new popular novel Lord Winworth, and in Belinda; or the Fair Fugitive, the heroine sat in the drawing-room reading Lord Winworth, while her father perused the newspaper. In another instance even the library was advertised. In Frederic and Caroline, a Minerva Press book of 1800, the hero strolled into a Margate library "furnished from the Minerva."\(^1\)

After these examples we are apt to find Lowndes' method of publishing the Sylph, a bit crude. He advertised this work in Evelina as being for sale by the same publisher. The Sylph, like Evelina, was published anonymously, and the inference drawn by the reader of Evelina was that the two works were from the pen of the same author. Reynolds and Sheridan were both indignant about the matter, Sheridan remarking that it was a "most impudent thing in that fellow." Dr. Burney acted upon the indignation of his friends and sent this note to Lowndes:

"Dr. Burney sends his Compts. to Mr. Lowndes and acquaints him that by the manner in which Evelina has for some time been advertised in company with the Sylph, it has generally been imagined that both those Novels have been written by one and the same Author. Now, as Mr. Lowndes must be certain that they are the work of different authors, and as accident has now made the Author of Evelina pretty generally known, who by no means wishes to rob the writer of the Sylph of whatever praise may be his due, Dr. B. begs Mr. L. will not only cease to advertise these books in an equivocal way, but inform the Public in some clear and decisive manner that they are the work of two different authors."

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Lowndes, somehow or other, acquired a reputation for himself as a man of "sterling integrity."\(^2\) Fanny Burney's business relationships with this man seem to cast, however, some doubt on his business character. It hardly stands to reason that Lowndes would have been willing to pay John Hamilton Mortimer seventy-three pounds for the illustrations to *Evelina* unless he recognized the merit of the book—exactly forty-three pounds more than he paid Miss Burney for *Evelina* itself. But even if Lowndes considered that Fanny Burney as an anonymous writer was really entitled to no more remuneration at first, it is possible that he might have shown a little generosity when he saw how popular the book later became. Even Bowen the Steine bookseller remarked "... all the trade cry shame on Lowndes. Not Ma'am, that I expected he could have known its worth, because that's out of the question; but when its profits told him what it was, it's quite scandalous that he should have done nothing! quite ungentlemanlike, indeed."\(^3\) Even if we allow for the fact that there might have been some business jealousy that would have prompted Bowen's remark, we still see some truth in his statement.

The bookseller-librarian had other tricks by which he hoped to entrap his readers. Books were not the only items of his stock-in-trade. We usually think of a bookshop as a place where we go to buy books, but even an unintelligent person knows that modern book-stores

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are often novelty shops, instead of book-stores. That with stationery, games, bridge novelties and a little bit of everything else, we might have to think carefully before we would admit that our book-store really could in one sense be called a book-store. The eighteenth century circulating library consisted of just such a mixture of trades. I am tempted to carry out another comparison and to say that the eighteenth century circulating library in its collection of odds and ends has almost a twentieth century counterpart in the corner drug store, the character of which served as the inspiration a few months ago for a popular song entitled: Why Do They Call It a Drug Store?

Our drug store displays to the view of the gullible public its array of cameras, its cosmetics, its chewing-gum, its patent medicines, its toys, its quack medicines—and a lending library. In the same way, the circulating library of the past fulfilled a variety of needs for the community in which it was located. Fanny Burney's Miss Widgott was a milliner¹ and Mr. Trashly, Mr. Homespun's bookseller in Buxton, seems also to have had a hand in the millinery business as a side-issue. Mr. Homespun thus describes the shop into which he had ventured:

"... in my progress I had well-nigh overset a glass-case of toothpicks, gold housewives, embroidered pin cushions, and embossed snuff-boxes.

And now it appeared, that this harlequin trader was rather a haberdasher, than a bookseller; or rather an ambiguous multiform merchant, dealing in the apparatus both of the soul and body.

¹ D'Arblay, Diary and Letters, v. 1, p. 226. Miss Widgott was Bowen's predecessor in the bookselling business in Brighton.
On casting my eyes toward a person at the other end of the shop, I saw her bonding wire, to form what is in this merry age facetiously called, a cap; over this person's head in fair arrangement, were to be seen a goodly show of hand boxes; and across the window near which she sat were ribbons variously and ridiculously twisted, with several specimens of her skill in decorating that part of the human body which is now more proportioned than any other. Seeing such preparations for the outside of the head, I gave up the idea of finding any internal furniture, so walking out of the shop, I asked pardon for having so grossly mistaken a milliner's and toyman's for a vendor of matter in the literary way. . . ."

Pratt's bookseller, Mr. Page, says his young women customers write about as much as they read. They put about as much money into his pockets by buying his stationery as they do by reading his books.

Mrs. Thrale writes to Fanny Burney from Chossington in 1780, describing Bowen's shop. He had been there only about three days, but his business seems to have been thriving even in that short time. One man comes in and asks for Russell on Seawater, another bounces in and requests that the latest novel be sent to his home that night. One woman glances at the ballads and pecks at the harpsichord "which stands here at every blockhead's mercy" while another selects Polly Sugarcake for her "long-legged missy."3

Some enterprising booksellers sold guide-books to bewildered travelers. Mr. Stall who opened a circulating library in Hastings in 1768, published the first Guide to Hastings. Mr. James Barry who succeeded Mr. Stall published four more editions of the Guide to Hastings,

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1 Pratt, Pupil of Pleasure, p. 27.
in 1797, 1815, and 1821. In Southampton, Thomas Baker, a printer and bookseller between 1767-76, owned a circulating library in the High Street, and printed the Southampton Guide.

Some circulating librarians sold toys. Among this group we find Mr. Tragly the bookseller in Burton; Mr. Silver in Margate, and Mr. Lewis Bull in Bath. Bull believed in versatility. He let lodgings in Bath, and at various times in his career acted as toyman, jeweler, goldsmith, bookseller-librarian, and vendor of Hill's Pectoral Balsam of Honey. One of his business competitors, Samuel Hazard, also sold Hill's Pectoral Balsam of Honey, volatile spirit of Fever. In one of the plays of the period we find a bookseller, a Mr. Tragly, working hand-in-glove with the local quack doctor.

We are not told that Mr. Tragly ran a circulating library, but I rather suspect that he was guilty of doing that very thing. He is at least a suspicious character. Teresa Cornelys, a clever woman coming to England, supposedly from Germany, at first gave popular masquerades at her house, but on the decline of the popularity of this form of entertainment, she availed herself of the opportunity to

1 L. F. Salzman, Hastings, pp. 81, 120.
2 Plomer, Dictionary, p. 12.
3 Pratt, Pupil of Pleasure, p. 29.
6 Ibid., p. 121.
set up in her home in Soho Square an "Academy of Sciences and Bellos Lottres—a Library with Newspapers, etc.,—and a debating society, open to both Sexes." This establishment of Teresa Cornelys' lasted until 1781.¹

It would be a hard task to attempt to classify the trades of two professed librarians mentioned by McGill. The first one, a Mr. Beuloc of Weymouth, placed an advertisement in the London Sun, which announced to the world that he sold "Books, Musical Instruments, Cutlery, Jewelry, Stationery, and other Stock in Trade of the well-frequented Circulating Library."² Love, the second librarian, left little to be desired by his customers. His circulating library offered "all the News, all the Conversation," and promised to add to a hundred and thirty periodical papers, "the Sun, the Edinburgh Journal, Dublin Evening Post, London Gazette, and Racing Calendar." In addition to these attractions, the frequenter of this library could find "Fine Teas, Coffee, Perfumery, etc., on the most reasonable terms" as well as "a list of Arrivals, and the Only Correct Register of Lodging Houses."³

This list of activities by no means exhausts the various occupations affiliated with circulating libraries. Mr. Silver in Margate conducted a raffle for the entertainment of his patrons as did also his competitors:

¹ Ashton, Old Times, p. 222.
² McGill, "Evergreen Tree of Diabolical Knowledge," Bookmen, v. 73, p. 270.
³ Ibid., p. 271. Unfortunately for us, Miss McGill fails to say where or when Love's library flourished.
"After dinner proceeded to the libraries, where the raffling lists were filling fast: was induced to throw in my shillings at Silver's and Hero's: from thence passed on to Wood's, Surflon's, and Garner's. At Surflon's heard music, and several favourite glee..."

Mr Silver also planned sight-seeing tours for visitors:

"What a charming General! (said I) 'spoilt in a Toyman. How you understand tactics, Mr. Silver!' 'Used to it all my life, Sir,' (said he with a pleasing flippancy) 'plan rides for the company daily all over the Island.'"

In Tunbridge Wells, we are told that while most people went to the library to see what new novels had been received and to read the papers, they never passed up the opportunity to read the conspicuous collection of verses, left there by visitors from time to time.

All the libraries found in watering-places served as social centers for the pleasure seekers visiting the town. Harriot Francis informs her friend Mary Johnson in a letter dated Oct. 21, 1793 that "She (the Duchess of Cumberland) comes to the Library every day at the same hour where she talks French Politicks incessantly." This library in Margate is described by the same writer as "the fashionable Lounge every morning from twelve to four."

In at least two instances we find libraries mentioned in connection with a budding romance. Mr. Bonus in one play, says of his sweetheart: "... But where is she? --will she take a rural walk with me? --will she go shopping, or to the library, or to the

1 Ashton, Old Times, p. 324.
2 Ibid., p. 323.
3 Helville, Society at Royal Tunbridge Wells, p. 249.
5 Ibid., p. 406.
box-office of the theatre?"  

In another play, the hero, his heart tormented by a love, which he does not feel free to divulge, goes to a library where he may read and quiet his restless soul. But while he is here, the young woman who has inspired his love appears to return a volume of Shakespeare, and his struggle begins anew. We are glad to learn later in the play that the two lovers find a satisfactory solution to their problem. One would think that since circulating libraries dealt so strongly in fiction that was meant to melt the heart, that they would really make excellent settings for the birth and growth of heart-affairs.

I shall close this discussion of libraries as social centers with two more examples. Mr. Bull's library in Bath is particularly remembered by one writer as "the focus of all the Intellectuals who resorted to Bath." In this shop he remembered "seeing a little knot of Literati who were wont to assemble in the shop of this bibliopolist" —Harrington, Falconer, and others whose names he had forgotten with the passing years. Allen Ramsay's library in Edinburgh had been a library of this character. In his shop, which bore as its sign the heads of Ben Jonson and Drummond of Hawthornden, the intellectual giants of Edinburgh came daily to gain information and to pass a

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3 Monkland, Literature and Literati of Bath, pp. 37-36.
social hour in congenial company. When this library passed into the hands of James Sibbald in 1780, it continued to be an intellectual center for those men who sought more in a library than the latest novel to while away an idle hour.

Much has been said by various critics about the evil effects of circulating libraries upon the easily-influenced minds of unstable youth. These men and women allowed themselves to grow a bit excited over an institution which had dedicated itself— in their minds, at least—to the perversion of morality. A poor frivolous girl reads the "sentimental trash" which circulates from its shelves, has her mind turned by false notions of love, and falls an easy prey to the first tempter who appears to lead her astray. Perhaps this bad odor which has attached itself to circulating libraries owes much to two classic examples mentioned by nearly all writers who have deigned to even notice circulating libraries: Colman's Polly Honeycomby and Sheridan's Lydia Languish. In both Polly Honeycomby and in The Rivals, the silly sentimental heroine has so immersed herself in novel-reading that she has lost all sense of the distinction between fiction and reality. None of the heroines in the novels Polly had read married a prosaic business man like Mr. Ledger. Instead they married gallant young heroes like Mr. Scribble. Why shouldn't she do likewise? Wasn't she just as good as any of them? If the parents of her heroines had objected to their lovers, as her own father did to Mr. Scribble, those heroines had considered it their moral duty to elope and to outwit the unreasonable parent or parents. If the heroines of her novels

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1 Timperley, Encyclopedia, p. 697.
had acted with such determination, why shouldn't she go them one bet-
ter? When she repulses Mr. Ledger, who was only a business man and
thus insignificant as a lover, she says: "I have out-topped them all
Miss Howe, Narcissa, Clarinda, Polly Barnes, Sophia Willis and all
of them. None of them ever treated an odious fellow with half so
much spirit."¹ Of course, Polly learns in ample time that her romantic
lover Mr. Scribble is her nurse's nephew and isn't a writer at all,
only a lawyer's clerk. The moral of the whole play is that sentimen-
tal young ladies patronize circulating libraries to the detriment of
their moral well-being, a risk which no well-bred young lady should
take. Colman has prefaced his play with a list of novels which he
says are to be found in almost any circulating library.

Lydia Languish in Sheridan's *Rivals* is another Polly Honey-
combs. Even the most generous critic would find it impossible to give
either Lydia or her circulating library any credit for her showing
much evidence of intelligence. But the workings of a kind providence
did intervene and see to it that Ensign Beverly should turn out to be
a wealthy young member of a respectable family, and not the penniless
hero Lydia thought him to be. Lydia was saved from what her aunt con-
sidered a bad end, in spite of herself and the circulating library
novels which had given her her opinion of the world.

We have other pictures of women readers which tally with
the pictures given us by Colman and Sheridan. Pratt describes some
of them for us. There is the woman who studies "only metaphysics;"

[First acted 1760].
there is the liezen who asks for that dear men of feeling, and who would suffer suffocation from snuff-odors, or any other odors left by un-fastidious readers who had preceded her in the reading of that wonderful book. The same lady calls for Cruel Disappointment, Roubou, or Suicide, Seduction, Unguarded Moments, Mutual Attachment, Assignment, Frederick or the Libertine, but like Lydia, Polly, and the group of women in Buxton, she passes up such books as the School of Virtue and Test of Filial Duty. Then there are the "young things"—they seem to have had them in those days, too—who read a chapter at hair-dressing time and who return their books to the library so perfumed and so powdered that the older readers find them more obnoxious than if they had been exposed to snuff, brandy, or strong waters. Incidentally, one must not forget the readers who come to the library, supposedly to obtain books, but really to see and to talk to the shop-man.

Colman and Sheridan were not alone in their disapproval of circulating libraries. Allan Ramsay was assailed by certain respectable citizens of Edinburgh who "took alarm at the effect of this kind of reading [plays and fiction] on the minds of youth." The magistrates tried to close his shop but were unsuccessful. It is interesting to note that at the close of the century, the British government did find it necessary to place restrictive measures on the activities

3 H. and Q., s. 4, v. 9, pp. 442-443.
of circulating libraries. These actions were taken, however, not because the government felt a sense of duty in protecting the morals of the young, but because it felt that the revolutionary ideas of the time were being spread much too rapidly through the medium of books lent by these libraries.

Jeffrey tells us that in his youth it was considered a disgrace to patronize circulating libraries, "that a greater mass of trash and rubbish never disgraced the press of any country than the ordinary Novels that filled and supported our circulating libraries." Another writer has this to say concerning them:

"Circulating libraries are of infinite use to the avaricious, and those of moderate incomes, and are very numerous; they produce a taste for reading which cannot be excited in any other way, and should be encouraged by the Legislature under proper legislations."

Clara Reeve was particularly outspoken in her disapproval of circulating libraries. She considered them a "great evil;" as young people were permitted to subscribe to them, they read indiscriminately and absorbed both poison and food together. One cannot

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1 Henry Thomas Buckle, *History of Civilization in England*, London, 1865, v. 1, pp. 490-491. A part of the Act reads as follows: "Every house, room, or place which shall be opened or used as a place of meeting for the purpose of reading books, pamphlets, newspapers, or other publications, and to which any person shall be admitted by payment of money (if not regularly licensed by the authorities) . . . shall be deemed a disorderly house," and the proprietor of such a house shall "be otherwise punished as the law directs in cases of disorderly houses." [39 George III c. 79 § 15, as quoted by Buckle].


resist the desire to smile at that trick of fate which caused the very
book in which this statement was made, the *Progress of Romance* (1785),
to turn up in a circulating library, and to be read by Landor, who
drew from it the inspiration for his *Gebir.*

A book which preached
so strongly against circulating libraries could hardly have rested
casily on their contaminated shelves:

Miss Reeve continued her criticism of circulating libraries
by admitting that reformers, in order to combat the evils of circulat¬
ing libraries, were forced to adopt its method of approaching the
reading public:

"At this period when a constant supply of Novels
were expected by the Readers of the Circulating Library,
some persons whose excellent principles led them to see and
lament the decline of virtuous manners, and the passion for
desultory reading; endeavored to stem the torrent by making
entertaining stories their vehicle to convey to the young
and flexible heart, wholesome truths, that it refused to
receive under the form of moral precepts, and instructions,
thus they tempered the utile with the dulci, and under the
disguise of Novels, gave examples of virtue rewarded and vice
punished."  

Miss Reeve, still in a reforming mood, proposed a list of
books for children and young ladies, that would be instructive and
be
that would at the same time wholesome. Such titles as *A Father's
Instructions,* *Mrs. Talbot's Meditations for every Day in The Week,*
*Mrs. Chapone's Works,* *The Lady's Preceptor,* and *The Geographical Gram¬
mar* could have held very little attraction to such readers as Lydia
Languish or Polly Honeycombe.

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Clara Reeve was not the only person to admit that teachers of morals were willing to use an institution of Satan if it but gave them an opportunity to propagate their doctrines. William Hutchinson in 1775 published The Doubtful Marriage, the moral purpose of which, according to the editor, was "to deter young people from such marriages, by holding out to them examples destitute of fiction. The mode of publication was chosen, to gain access to circulating libraries; whence the youth of both sexes, in this age obtain much of their reading; thereby to reach the eye of those to whom a grave moral essay would not approach." Evidently those writers who considered a circulating library about the lowest thing possible were not averse to using it themselves. They probably thought it a bit unfair that the devil should have a monopoly on all good things—for instance, a quick and popular medium for the rapid circulation of books.

The plays of the eighteenth century find in circulating libraries a splendid subject for ridicule. Foote, in particular, never misses an opportunity to tell an exaggerated joke at their expense. One of his heroes, a gay young blade appropriately named Wilding, "will tell you more lies in an hour, than all the circulating libraries put together will publish in a year." In another of Foote's plays, a penniless author loses his temper and throws his book at the printer's devil. The printer's devil indignantly retaliates with: "What d'ye

1 Nichols, Literary Illustrations, v. 1, p. 424.
think it belongs to, the Circulating Library, or that it is one of your own performances, that you—"1

In another case, a young man whose father has arranged a match for him, doesn’t love the girl his father has chosen for him, but he rationalizes his decision to accept the match: "... you see, love is all nonsense; well enough to furnish romances for boys and girls at circulating libraries; that is all, take my word for it."2

One must not lose sight of the fact that the purpose of these plays was to satirize life, and in order to satirize life the dramatist had to exaggerate it. All the little follies of dress, of manners, and of beliefs were distorted and held up for ridicule—and circulating libraries as a part of the life of the eighteenth century met with the same fate in the hands of the satirist. We must be on our guard against the testimony of plays for this reason, and accept their statements for what they are—partial truths only. For there really is another side to the story of circulating libraries which I have not yet considered—any more than the comedies of the eighteenth century have done. Sydney draws for us a gloomy picture when he discusses the character of novels found in a circulating library. According to his opinion, "rotten" was the only adjective which, with very few exceptions, he cared to use in describing those novels. The libraries were full of novels which were not only inferior but "even of a depraved character." Reading these abnormal books became almost a

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2 Murphy, "The Citizen" (1763), Act I, Sc. 1, The Modern British Drama, v. 5, p. 466.
form of dissipation among both young men and women who had not the in-
telligence to direct their reading into a more wholesome channel, or
who were interested only in satisfying a morbid craving for excite-
ment. "Novel-reading was one of the chief employments of the fair
sex, and became with them oftentimes a passion as strong and uncon-
trollable as gin-drinking."¹

Perhaps too much has already been said about the unwhole-
some influence of circulating libraries, and too little about their
better influence. We have on this other side of the question the
testimony of some of the best minds of the age that the situation de-
scribed by Sydney was not wholly true. Lamb, however, undoubtedly
goes to another extreme from that of Sydney when he says:

"How beautiful to a genuine lover of reading are
the sullied leaves, and worn-out appearance, nay, the very
odor (beyond Russia) if he would forget fastidiousness in
kind feelings, of an old "Circulating Library" Tom Jones,
or Vicar of Wakefield! How they speak of the thousand
thumbs that have turned over their pages with delight! —of
the lone sempstress, whom they may have cheered (milliner,
or hard-working mantua-maker) after her long day's needle-
toil, running into midnight, when she has snatched an hour,
ill-spared from sleep, to steep her cares, as in some Lethean
cup, in spelling out their enchanting contents!"²

I should say that the truth about circulating libraries lay
somewhere between the opinions of Sydney and Lamb. I am willing to
grant that perhaps the majority of circulating libraries were store-
houses of trash, patronized by sentimental waiting-maids and unfledged
boarding-school girls. I am also willing to grant that these women

¹ Sydney, England and the English in the Eighteenth Century, v. 2,
p. 139.

² Charles Lamb, "Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading," Essays of
Elia, p. 219.
read their novels uncritically and shed over them many a sentimental tear, and that they probably formed a warped picture of the world from the tales they devoured. But tear-shedding as a luxury was not entirely an art peculiar to the eighteenth century, a belief which has probably arisen because of varied and numerous discussions of eighteenth century sentimentality. Weeping has not entirely gone out of style yet, even among people who should know better. One has but to attend a few sentimental movies and to watch the reaction of the audience to find that this is true.

But I wander from my point. What I was going to say was this: even if circulating libraries as a whole were distributors of "sentimental trash" to a public of Richardsonian tastes, is it not possible that they might have held an appeal for some people for other reasons? And if this appeal was a smaller one, as it undoubtedly was, it was smaller because the more critical minds of that period, as in all periods, were in the minority and could demand no more than the privilege of the minority.

Mr. Page in Pratt's Family Secrets says that he has his more serious books but that they seldom go out. It is interesting to note that Mr. Page includes Gibbon among his group of books which are in no great demand. We cannot blame the circulating-librarian for not including too many unpopular books on his shelves. After all, he was a business man and had to cater to the tastes of the public. And if Clarissa Harlowe was so popular that it cost the Manchester Subscription Library in 1769, seventeen shillings six pence, while

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1 V. 1, p. 389.
Chaucer (Thynne's edition, 1532) cost only two shillings six pence,¹ there must have been a reason for that popularity in the reading public. The bookseller can hardly be blamed if he expected more calls for Clarissa than he did for Chaucer. He had invested about eight times as much money in the former as he had in the latter, and he naturally expected to gain a little on his investment.

We have, however, the confessions of some of the great and the near great of the eighteenth century that they patronized circulating libraries, and that they found in them books which answered their needs. Fanny Burney was perhaps as enthusiastic a frequenter of circulating libraries as anybody; and she has left us some interesting information concerning those places as well as their proprietors, information doubly valuable to us as it is given both from the viewpoint of an author whose books were to be found on the shelves of circulating libraries, and from the viewpoint of an eager reader. T. Lordes published her Evelina in 1778, and soon after she writes in her diary: "My little book, [Evelina] I am told is now at all the circulating libraries."² She had inquired for it—or rather she had intended to inquire for it but had lost her nerve and had instead let her brother Edward inquire for it at Bell's circulating library, a shop at which Dr. Burney subscribed for his new books.³ Somewhat later, Charles, another brother, secured Evelina at the Reading library, where it was

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¹ H. and C., e. 5, v. 7, p. 452.
² D'Arblay, Diary and Letters, v. 1, p. 23.
very much in demand.1

In 1780 Samuel Crisp, "her daddy Crisp," wrote to Fanny, recom-
manding her to borrow, or to get from the circulating library, An
Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley Cibber.2 Fanny Burney did not con-
fine her interest to any one library. She seems to have interested
herself in libraries wherever she went. She and Mrs. Thrale, on one
of their trips, stopped at Reigate, where Mrs. Thrale inquired of the
bookseller if he had secured the book Evelina she had recommended to
him.3 In Brighton she and Mrs. Thrale went to Widgett's "the milliner
and library woman on the Steyne."4 Later on she spent some idle hours
in the shop of Mr. Bowen, who was Miss Widgett's successor, as well
as some time in the shop of Mr. Bowen's competitor, Mr. Thomas, who
had succeeded to the business of the E. Baker whom I mentioned before
as doing business in both Brighton and Tunbridge Wells.5 Miss Burney's
description of Bowen is worth quotation as it was perhaps the portrait
of the average librarian of her day:

"The rest of the morning we spent, as usual, at
this place, upon the Steyn, and in booksellers' shops. Mrs.
Thrale entered all our names at Thomas's the fashionable book-
seller; but we find he has now a rival, situated also upon the
Steyn, who seems to carry away all the custom and all the com-
pany. This is a Mr. Bowen, who is just come from London, and
who seems just the man to carry the world before him as a
shop-keeper. Extremely civil, attentive to catch opportun-
ities of obliging, and assiduous to make use of them— . . .

1 D'Arblay, Diary and Letters, v. 1, p. 27.
2 Ibid., p. 322.
3 Ibid., p. 217.
4 Ibid., p. 226.
5 See p. 9.
He did not, however, then at all suspect who I was, for he showed me nothing but schemes for raffles, and books, pocket-cases, etc., which were put up for those purposes."

We learn that by 1780, Fanny Burney was at least acquainted with Bull's Library in Bath, the same library which was familiar not only to Lydia Languish but also to Robert Southey. In 1789 she had subscribed to the library in Weymouth, "not a bad one," where she bought Bishop Patrick's Pilgrim. During the same year she read the Art of Contentment, which she had found in the Saltram Library.

Fanny Burney probably has as long a reading record in circulating libraries as anyone. But Sir Walter Scott's experiences with circulating libraries, if perhaps not so varied as Miss Burney's, were really just as enjoyable. Miss Burney had a speaking acquaintance with several libraries. Scott's reading was confined mostly to Sibbald's library. He considered the hours spent in this library along with the hours spent at the theatre, the two most delightful distractions from his law study in Edinburgh. Every Saturday, and during vacations more often than Saturday, Scott with John Irving, his companion of those days, would obtain a supply of books from the circulating library. They would then hie themselves to Salisbury Crags, Arthur's Seat, or Blackford Hill to read the books together. They were particularly happy when they drew a choice romance of knight-errantry, and

1 D'Arblay, Diary and Letters, v. 1, p. 281.
2 Ibid., p. 423.
3 Ibid., v. 4, p. 300.
4 Ibid., p. 318.
from this early reading, they remembered The Castle of Otranto, Spenser, Ariosto, and Boiardo as special favorites.\(^1\)

Scott considered Sibbald's library an excellent one and it probably was. Allan Ramsay, the poet, who started the library about 1725, had created in his establishment an intellectual atmosphere which had perpetuated itself after his death. Sibbald, who finally bought the place, was no ordinary librarian, and under his management, the high character of Allan Ramsay's old library was not allowed to degenerate. Scott was particularly interested in the old songs and the old romances which he found in Sibbald's library:

"This collection, now dismantled and dispersed, contained at that time many rare and curious works, seldom found in such a collection. Mr. Sibbald himself, a man of rough manners but of some taste and judgment, cultivated music and poetry."\(^2\)

It was in Sibbald's library that Scott, in addition to poring over old French and Italian books, had the privilege of getting his first glimpse of Robert Burns, who like Scott, appreciated the worth of the man who owned the library. Robert Burns, so far as I know, has left no statement of having read books from Sibbald's library. But he has left us an interesting letter which tells us that he had business dealings with Sibbald, and that his business relations with the man were marked by liberality on Sibbald's side, and appreciation on Burns' side:

"The warmth with which you have befriended an obscure man, and young author, in your three last magazines--I can only say, Sir, I feel the weight of the obligation, and


\(^2\) Ibid., p. 36.
wish I could express my sense of it."1

The kindness referred to by Burns concerned a favorable re-
view of Burns' Kilmarnock poems which appeared in Sibbald's *Edinburgh
Magazine* during October, November, and December, 1786.2

Southey, Coleridge, Lamb, and Godwin were other late eight-
eighth century devotees of circulating libraries. They seemed to find,
in most cases, just what they sought in those places.

In Bull's library where Lydia Languish's maid had searched
so diligently for the choice sentimental novels of the day, Southey
found Hoole's version of the *Orlando Furioso* and Sponsor's *Faerie
Queene*, and lost himself in the old romance of the past.3

Gibbon, in commenting on his early interest in historical
subjects says: "The circulating libraries of London and Bath afforded
a rich treasure; I borrowed many books . . .."4 One wishes that Gib-
bon had been not only more explicit in telling us which of the Bath
and London libraries he used, but also more explicit in informing us
about the kinds of books he read. We do know that he was not too
serious-minded to read some fiction: Sir Joshua Reynolds remarked
that he read all five volumes of *Exolina* in one day.5 Did fiction
then, have a place on the reading-list of the young Gibbon who was no

1 Nichols, *Literary Illustrations*, v. 3, p. 760.
2 Robert Burns, *Letters* . . ., edited by J. De Lancey Ferguson,
4 Edward Gibbon, *Autobiographies* . . ., edited by John Murray,
stronger to circulating libraries? It probably did. But Gibbon no
doubt also found more serious books in circulating libraries, which
stimulated his early interest in history. When we consider that the
Lydia Languishes far out-numbered the Gibbons and Southey's, we can
only wonder that a Gibbon or a Southey should have found anything in
a circulating library to whet their more critical tastes.

Coloridge, at least during his youth, subscribed to cir¬
culating libraries. One day, when he was a boy at school, he was walk¬
ing in the streets and accidentally got his hand entangled in the
pocket of a passer-by, who at first took him for a pick-pocket. Find¬
ing that the boy was only indulging his fancy by pretending that he
was Leander, swimming the Hellespont, he became interested in him and
subscribed to a circulating library in Cheapside for him.1 Coloridge
himself writes thus of his early experience with a circulating library:

"I read through the catalogue, folios and all,
whether I understood them or did not understand them, run¬
ing all risks in skulking out to get the two volumes which
I was entitled to have daily. Conceive what I must have
been at fourteen; I was in a continual low fever. My whole
being was, with eyes closed to every object of present sense,
to crumple myself up in a sunny corner, and read, read, read—
fancy myself on Robinson Crusoe's island, finding a mountain
of plum-cake, and eating a room for myself, and then eating
it into the shapes of tables and chairs—hunger and fancy!"2

Years later Coloridge came to feel that reading books from
circulating libraries was a waste of time and not to be tolerated.
It was not a "pass-time," but a "kill-time," and the reader of circu¬
lating library novels found himself indulging in an ambitionless sort

1 Hugh L. Fausset, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, New York, 1926, p. 26;

2 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Epistolaris . . . , edited by
of day-dreaming. Coleridge does not tell us, however, that he ever felt any regret for the many hours which he had spent in a circulating library.

We know that Coleridge during his stay at Nether Stowey subscribed to the Bristol Library, and was perhaps one of its most critical patrons. The Bristol Library was at this time under the proprietorship of George Catcott. There remains in existence a letter which Coleridge wrote to Mr. Catcott, indignantly protesting against the laws of the library which he claimed he should not be forced to follow. Catcott had written to him, asking him to return some books. He says in his reply to Catcott that he did not read novels or other books which could be quickly devoured. Instead he selected books of a weightier character which were not in great demand, and that he naturally required a longer time to read those books than to read the latest novel. He goes on to say that if he is not to be permitted to keep his books longer than the allotted time, he will forfeit his subscription, as it will be of little value to him. From the character of the books obtained by Coleridge from the Bristol Library—


3 Coleridge wrote to Poole from Germany in 1799: "[Wordsworth's] chief objection to Stowey is the want of books. The Bristol Library is a hum and will do us little service." (Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, edited by Hartley Coleridge, London, 1895, v. 1, p. 270.) As a matter of fact, the truth was perhaps a little different from this statement. Coleridge had simply read everything there was in the Bristol library to be read, and was ready and eager to conquer the shelves of some other library. In order to appreciate fully how much
was, incidentally, also well-known to Southey—as well, as from the fact that the library was managed by a committee which had placed Cottcot in charge of its books, I should say that it was probably a subscription library rather than a circulating library. Although a subscription library was supposed to circulate books of a higher type and to appeal to the more educated reader, it is sometimes hard to draw a hard and fast line between the two kinds of libraries.

Godwin was another of the intellectuals who used circulating libraries to advantage. In his youth he had been refused admittance to one college, because the authorities thought they detected in him symptoms of Sandemanianism. He later entered Newton College, which either overlooked these symptoms or was more lenient and didn't think it altogether a crime to be a disciple of Sandeman. The following summer, Godwin, curious to find out just what he had been accused of, obtained the works of Sandeman from the Rochester library. This is the only reference I have found to Godwin as a reader of circulating library books. He was, however, connected with circulating libraries, perhaps directly and indirectly, as an author throughout his life. In 1783 he wrote *Demon and Delia*, a novel which he sold to Hookham for five guineas. In 1784 he wrote another novel, *Imogen, a Pastoral Romance*.

_C. Kegan Paul, William Godwin . . . , Boston, 1876, v. 1, p. 14._

_Ibid.*, p. 21. This was probably Thomas Jordan Hookham, 100 New Bond Street, London, who in 1775 succeeded to the business of Thomas Hookham (probably his father), who had been a bookseller in New Bond Street between 1772-1775, and was "chiefly remembered for his circulating library." (Plomer, *Dictionary*, p. 151.)
which he sold to Lane for ten pounds.\(^1\) Since these two men owned circulating libraries it is fair to assume that Godwin's books were to be found on the shelves of their libraries. Later, we read of Political Justice that "few of the circulating libraries in the provinces were without a copy . . . ," and we know that on November 25, 1793, Robert Southey obtained Political Justice from the Bristol library.\(^2\)

We have further evidence of the popularity of this book from a letter written by Samuel Newton to William Godwin, December 4, 1793:

"When I was lately at my son's at Uitham, I was determined, as he had procured it for a book-club there, I believe on my recommendation, to read it attentively through, though it was in a library at Norwich some time before, to which I belonged, but I had not time then to investigate its contents.\(^3\)

Charles Lamb, perhaps a little weary from the burdens which an unkind fate had thrust upon his shoulders, found solace in the books he procured from circulating libraries. On October 26, 1796, he wrote a pathetic letter to Coleridge, in which he said that he sometimes had difficulty in finding books for Mary to read, and that the two of them had nearly exhausted their London library.\(^4\) The following year he wrote again to Coleridge, this time asking him for

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1 Paul, William Godwin: Lane (1738-1814) was the owner of a famous library in Leadenhall Street, and outstanding as a promoter in establishing circulating libraries in the provinces. From his Minerva Press issued many of those novels which finally found a home in country circulating libraries many miles distant. He was the son of a poulterer and set up first as a bookseller in half of his father's shop. (Nichols, Illustrations, v. 8, p. 285; Timperley, Encyclopedia, p. 853.)


help: "I wish I could get more of Priestley's works. Can you recommend me any more books, easy of access, such as circulating shops afford."  

Couper, no doubt also a little lonesome, wrote to his friend Joseph Hill a similar request: "I shall be obliged to you if you will be so good as to subscribe for me to some well-furnished circulating library, and leave my address upon the counter, written in a legible hand, and order them to send me down a catalogue."  

Mr. Page's metaphysicianess, who asked for Priestley on Ne-cessity was not the only person to find Priestley in a circulating library. It is very likely that Lamb, whom I have mentioned above, became acquainted with him through books obtained from some circulating library. Jeremy Bentham, who tells us that he shed many bitter tears over Clarissa Harlowe as a child, found Priestley's Essay on Government at "a little circulating library belonging to a little coffee house not far from Queen's College."  

Bishop Percy, indulging in somewhat lighter reading, wrote to Jane West from Brighton, June 7, 1800, that he had had a most difficult time in obtaining her novel, Rule of the Times, in spite of the fact that Brighton had three circulating libraries and that the season

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1 Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb, Letter of January 2, 1797, p. 78.  
2 A Selection from Cowper's Letters, edited by E. V. Lucas, Oxford University Press, 1911, p. 95.  
had hardly begun. In this same correspondence between Bishop Percy and Jane West we obtain a somewhat interesting comment on William Lane as a publisher. Mrs. West's first novel, Maria Williams, was published by Lane of Leadenhall Street in 1793. The authoress claims that she was "very ill-used" by the man to whom she sold her first novel, that he had permitted many mechanical errors to slip into the book, and that these errors had completely obscured the merits of her work.  

Lane, in spite of his varied activities as a publisher and circulating-librarian, is a somewhat shadowy figure. It seems strange that a character so widely-recognized as outstanding in his business should have received as little notice from his contemporaries as he did.

As I have mentioned before in this paper, Landor found his inspiration for Gobir in a copy of Clara Reeve's Progress of Romance, lent to him by a Miss Aylmer, who had obtained it from the Swansea circulating library. Another interesting reader was John Leyden, a shepherd's son, who had in his youth trudged several miles through the snow to borrow from a grudging blacksmith a copy of the Arabian Nights. He devoted the greater part of his first winter in Edinburgh to desultory reading. He had arranged his hours of study in such a way that he was able to spend the greater portion of his time, browsing in the college library, borrowing books from private collections, and

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1 Nichols, Illustrations, v. 8, p. 323.
2 Ibid., p. 331.
3 Landor, Letters and Other Unpublished Writings, p. 67.
4 John Reith, Life of Dr. John Leyden, Galashiels, p. 12.
rummaging the shelves of circulating libraries.¹

We know that Hannah More in her youth had access to a library in her neighborhood—probably a circulating library, although I am unable to state this as a certainty.² Warburton, Jane Austen, and Leigh Hunt fall into a class by themselves. Although no one would dare to question the integrity of their judgment in reading, one must admit that they made no effort to separate the good books from the bad when they got them from a circulating library. They themselves were not ashamed to admit that they enjoyed the trashy books as well as the good ones. Of Warburton it was said that after his long and tedious studies, he would send to the circulating library for a basketful of books. His wife remarked that she often went into his study and found him laughing as he read, although he was all alone.³

In December, 1798, Jane Austen announces in a letter addressed to her sister Cassandra that a Mrs. Martin had opened a library in their neighborhood and had solicited her subscription:

"As an inducement to subscribe, Mrs. Martin tells us that her Collection is not to consist only of Novels, but of every kind of Literature, etc., etc.—she might have spared this pretension to our family, who are great Novel-readers & not ashamed of being so ..."⁴

Several months earlier she had written to Cassandra that her father was sitting by the fireside, reading the Midnight Bell, a book

¹ Keith, Life of Dr. John Leyden, p. 38.

² More, Memoirs, v. 1, p. 29.


which he had obtained from the library. One can picture the Austen family, reading away many a long winter hour around this same fireplace. One can imagine that some of the novels read by Jane were so terrible—although she probably read every word of them—that they made her form resolutions to do something better in the novel way herself. How else can we account for the superb irony found in *Northanger Abbey*? Catherine Morland, the heroine of this story, is a silly young woman, whose head has been somewhat turned by too many gothic romances, and who goes through life in a daze, investing commonplace situations with a glamour borrowed from her reading. She visits a friend of hers, Eleanor Tilney, in the abbey-home of the latter, and becomes greatly excited over the possibility of stirring up a long-unsolved mystery. Eleanor’s brother, Robert Tilney, finds Catherine’s naiveté very refreshing and falls in love with her. In one of his conversations with his sister and with Catherine, he hits upon an amusing characterization of a circulating library:

"Miss Morland has been talking of nothing more dreadful than a new publication which is shortly to come out, in three duodecimo volumes, two-hundred and twenty-six pages in each, with a frontispiece to the first, of two tombstones and a lantern—do you understand?—And you, Miss Morland—my stupid sister has mistaken all your clearest expressions. You talked of expected horrors in London; and instead of instantly conceiving, as any rational creature would have done, that such words could relate only to a circulating library, she immediately pictured to herself a mob of three thousand men assembling in St. George’s Field; the Bank attacked, the Tower threatened, the streets of London flowing with blood . . ."2

Jane Austen could never have written this passage without a

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1 *Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others*, p. 20.
first-hand knowledge of circulating libraries, and she could not have made her satire so genial and so good-natured had she not cherished in her heart a fondness for them. Sometimes we laugh at things we like because familiarity with them has bred in us an amused acceptance of their bad qualities as well as their good ones, and we can appreciate a good joke at their expense. I think that Jane Austen's laughter arose from a similar feeling toward circulating libraries.

Leigh Hunt, in a spirit similar to that of Jane Austen, confesses that his reading tastes were broad enough to include just about everything in the way of fiction. He subscribed while still in school to Lane's library in Leadenhall Street, and the reading he indulged in as a result of his acquaintance with this library made him forever after a glutton for novels:

"I can read their three-volume enormities to this day without skipping a syllable; though I guess pretty nearly all that is going to happen, from the mysterious gentleman who opens the work in the dress of a particular century, down to the distribution of punishments and the drying up of tears in the last chapter."

They should have known each other—Jane Austen and Leigh Hunt. They could have had some enjoyable moments together, reading circulating-library novels, and laughing together at a weakness which led them to read books recognized by them as trash, but still, books which they enjoyed reading.

Leigh Hunt has left us an excellent description of John Bell, at whose library Fanny Burney would have inquired after Evelina—had not her timidity got the better of her. Leigh Hunt considered Bell

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(1746-1831) an unusual character. He gives us a picture of the man, which leaves no doubt in our minds as to his humanness: "a plain man, with a red face, and a nose exaggerated by intemperance," and yet on the whole not a man of unpleasing personality. He had black eyes, a happy smile, and a pleasant voice. He was not an educated man; he did not even appreciate great literature, preferring the poetry of the Della Cruscanus to the poetry of a Milton. Yet this man, who lacked a certain taste in things literary, and who, probably through too much love of entertaining, finally became a bankrupt, did leave one contribution which survived him. He was the first printer who insisted on using a short "s" in all his published works.\(^1\)

This case, John Bell had dealings of a business nature with "Monk" Lewis, and indirectly with Scott through "Monk" Lewis. In 1799 "Monk" Lewis was busily negotiating with Bell for the publication of a translation by Scott of Goethe's Goetz von Bliichingen of the Iron Hand. Bell bought the translation for twenty-five guineas, promising to give to the young author twenty-five more guineas should a second edition be called for.\(^2\) "Monk" Lewis had books of his own published by Bell, which inspired in him the following verses:

"In your last book, friend Mat, you really tell
A lie so gross, that ev'ry one describes it;
Your title-page asserts, 'Sold by John Bell.'
How can you say 'tis sold,' when no one buys it?"\(^3\)

Circulating libraries—it is a strange and multi-colored picture which they bring to the mind! Books—largely of an entertain-

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2 Lockhart, Memoirs of Scott, v. 1, p. 256.
3 Life and Correspondence of M. G. Lewis ... London, 1839, v. 1, p. 87.
ing, frivolous, or even dubious nature, but some, meaty and heavy with thought. Readers—some trying to run the pace for style in books, as for style in dress and manner, some losing themselves in a maze of fictional experiences, and scorning to live life as it was really lived, and some, a few perhaps, eagerly scanning catalogues for those weightier volumes which not only shaped the philosophy and destiny of their lives, but which gave them visions for producing similar masterpieces. Booksellers—friendly, business-like, some tricky and shifty in their business dealings, some kindly, generous, and intelligent in all their relationships with the reading-public. Such is a rough sketch of the chief components of those libraries, which played so important a social and intellectual role in the reading world of the eighteenth century. A little too commercial perhaps; perhaps also a little too-inclined to cater to the grosser and the less critical tastes, but nevertheless, creating and stimulating a love of books among a class of readers who would otherwise have encountered grave difficulties in satisfying their literary hunger.
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