

THE READING NATION IN
THE ROMANTIC PERIOD

WILLIAM ST CLAIR



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CHAPTER I

Reading and its consequences

During the four centuries when printed paper was the only means by which complex texts could be carried in quantity across time and distance, almost everyone believed that reading had vital consequences. Reading, all were sure, shaped the knowledge, the beliefs, the understanding, the opinions, the sense of identity, the loyalties, the moral values, the sensibility, the memories, the dreams, and therefore, ultimately, the actions, of men, women, and children. Reading helped to shape mentalities and to determine the fate of the nation.¹

But was their assumption correct? Can it be historically validated? And, if so, what are the implications for our understanding of the antecedents that have taken us, as societies, to our present mental states? If the assumption that reading has wide social and political consequences is even only partly valid, then should we not expect the reading of written texts to feature strongly in our explanations of how and why societies change? And, since we can be certain that mentalities are always changing, should we not take a close interest in the governing structures? Although there has always been much interest in the meaning of certain texts, how they came to be written, and in the lives of their authors, little attention has been paid to the processes by which the texts reached the hands, and therefore potentially the minds, of different constituencies of readers. Could histories of reading help us to understand how knowledge was constituted and diffused, how opinions were formed and consolidated, how group identities were constructed, and, more generally, why ideas that at one time seemed mainstream and unassailable could suddenly lose credibility, while others persisted for centuries largely unchallenged? Can we find explanations which apply to the print era as a whole? Can we begin to model the links between texts, books, reading, changing mentalities, and wider historical effects?

¹ For the texts that set out these beliefs in the romantic period see chapters 7, 14 and 16.

The questions I ask are not only of historical interest. The political and economic arrangements governing the production and sale of copies of written texts today (and the production of the many other cultural media invented later) are essentially unchanged since they were devised and put in place in the late fifteenth century and altered in the late eighteenth.² These include a presumption that, in addition to some offered free, the supply of copies of written texts should be largely determined by a market divided into two sectors, one for older texts, where the prices, and therefore the extent of access, are set in conditions of economic competition, and another sector for more recent texts, where the prices are set by private intellectual property owners in conditions of state-guaranteed monopoly. The governing structures which began as an economic response to the technology of paper, ink, moveable type, and hand-powered printing presses, are still in place in an age when copies of texts can be reproduced and circulated instantaneously direct from person to person, in limitless numbers, at infinitesimal unit cost. If an historical investigation reveals identifiable systemic links between texts, printed books, reading, mentalities, and wider consequences in the past, we may be able to take a more informed view of the public and private choices that we face in the digital age.

The main tradition of literary and cultural history has been to consider the texts of those authors whose works have subsequently been regarded as the best or the most innovative in a chronological order of first publication.³ The printed writings of the past have been presented as a parade of great names described from a commentator's box set high above the marching column. Early Modern gives way to the Enlightenment, and then Romanticism. Here come the Augustans, to be followed by the Romantics, and then the Victorians, or whichever other categories are chosen. According to the conventions of this approach, those texts of an age which have later been judged to be 'canonical' in a wide sense, are believed to catch the essence, or some of the essence, of the historical situation from which they emanated. In recent decades this parade model has been supplemented by studies which present the printed texts of a particular historical period as debating and negotiating with one another in a kind of open parliament with all the members participating and listening. Under both the parade

² The date of the effective outlawing of perpetual intellectual property in printed texts in England and the colonies. Discussed in chapter 6.

³ The contradictions implicit in traditional literary history are well illustrated by David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Baltimore 1992).

and parliament conventions, the historian makes his or her own selection of texts to be included and may draw on other evidence besides the written word. Both approaches can be linked, although they need not be, with critical and hermeneutic analyses which are not time specific, employing, for example, psycho-analytic theories to excavate hidden meanings, or applying theories of myth to explain the enduring appeal of certain texts and narratives.⁴ And all can be situated in their specific historical contexts.

However, as methodologies for understanding how mentalities may have been formed by reading, none of these approaches is satisfactory. For one thing, any study of the consequences of the reading of the past ought to consider the print which was actually read, not some modern selection, whether that selection is derived from judgements of canon or from other modern criteria. Nor can these approaches normally accommodate the fact that the impact of a text on its readers invariably occurred at a different time from when it was first written, and often in very different circumstances, the writing and the reading being separated in some cases by a few days or weeks, but in many others by years or by centuries. Secondly, in describing the reading of a particular period of the past, it cannot be enough to draw solely on the texts written during that period, specially significant though these may have been. Readers have never confined their reading to contemporary texts. Much of the reading that took place in the past, probably the majority, was of texts written or compiled long ago and far away. In both parade and parliament models, newly written printed texts succeed their immediate predecessors, engage intellectually with them, and in some cases defeat or supersede them, and it can be convincingly shown that this happened in certain cases. As far as readers were concerned, however, chronological linearity was not the norm. Not all readers had access to all newly published texts as in the parade or parliament models, nor did they necessarily give equal attention to those texts which they did read.

Furthermore, no historical reader, whatever his or her socio-economic or educational status, read printed texts in the chronological order in which they were first published. This was true even of modern texts. During the romantic period in Great Britain, for example, many readers read the texts of the Enlightenment only after they had been subjected to an intensive school education in the texts of the Counter-Enlightenment, and many

⁴ For a discussion of author- and text-based approaches, see James Chandler, *England in 1819* (Chicago 1998), part 1.

others, including many women, read the Counter-Enlightenment without having read the Enlightenment at all. If, as we must posit in any historical inquiry into the effects of reading, the engagement between competing texts occurred mainly in the minds of readers, we must expect the trajectories of development to be different from those of the first writings or of the first printings of texts.

But the problem of relating printed texts to reading, cultural formation, and changing mentalities goes deeper than the need to find ways of offsetting the shortcomings of the parade and parliament conventions. While text-based studies can recover an understanding of what it was possible for their authors to think at the time when the texts were composed, they do not necessarily reveal what was thought by their readers. Nor can text-based studies enable us to judge impact. All exclusively text-based approaches, because they either ignore readers altogether, or they derive their readers from the texts, are caught in a closed system. Although they may help us to understand the meanings that the readers of the past may have taken from a text, or ought to have taken if they had been perceptive enough, they cannot, by themselves, without circularity, reveal the meanings that readers historically did construct.

Older readers of newly printed texts had memories going back to their childhood reading and education, and brought expectations to their reading acquired much earlier, whereas others were children whose minds were less fully formed. Any inquiry into the impact of the printed writings of any particular historical period must, therefore, span the reading of a minimum of two or three generations, as individual readers passed through the whole cycle from first reading as a child to ceasing to read in old age or at death. Text-based studies cannot by themselves recover the processes whereby readers filled in the gaps that exist in all texts, how they made their interpretations from their previous base of knowledge and expectations, or how their attitudes and actions may have altered as a consequence. We may find it useful to reconstruct the 'implied reader' addressed by the author, hoped for by the author, or implicit in the rhetorical strategy of the text and paratext. We may helpfully utilise notions of the 'critical reader' who is alert to the multiple meanings and effects of words, knowledgeable about the generic conventions of texts and intertextuality, and who picks up veiled allusions, hidden metaphor, ambiguities, underlying ideologies, and other subtleties. We may confidently accept the existence of 'communities of interpretation' who bring shared preconceptions and expectations about texts and genres to the act of reading, and accept as a premise that readers were normally much constrained in the meanings they created and accepted.

We may reasonably assume too that strategies were often successful in pre-setting expectations and responses, and that some readers may have devoted considerable efforts to trying to build a full and balanced critical understanding of the meanings of the texts which they read.⁵ However, the general point seems to me to be incontestable that we cannot, without circularity, recover the range of actual responses to the reading of printed texts without information from outside the texts.

Without implying that the reactions of readers were independent of the texts being read, we need to grant them autonomy. If we wish to investigate the consequences of reading, we need to recognise that readers had freedom, within their circumstances, to choose which texts to read and which passages to give most attention to, to skip, to argue, to resist, to read against the grain, to be influenced by irrelevancies, to be careless, to misunderstand, to be distracted, to slip into dreams, to disagree but to continue reading, to stop reading at any time, and to conclude that the reading had been a waste of time. Readerly autonomy also included the opportunity to pass on opinions and impressions, even if they were ill-informed, confused, or irrelevant, to anyone willing to listen. As far as children were concerned, if our own experience of real children is any guide, their mental responses to the reading of the texts chosen for them by adults were even less constrained.

Reports of individual responses to reading as recorded in letters, diaries, or other documents can help us to break out of the closed circle implicit in exclusively text-based approaches. For that purpose they are invaluable. But anecdotal information raises methodological difficulties of other kinds. When records are plentiful, it is easy to slip into the belief that they are a reliable record of actual acts of reception. It is easy to forget that, however many of such reports are found and collected, they can never be, at best, anything beyond a tiny, randomly surviving, and perhaps highly unrepresentative, sample of the far larger total of acts of reception which were never even turned into words in the mind of the reader let alone recorded in writing.⁶ Even if we are willing to regard the written records of individual responses as reliable, as we probably normally should, they too are written texts which were produced by their authors, within the generic conventions of a specific historical time, with implied readers and intended

⁵ For 'reception theory' and the notion of 'horizons of expectations' as developed by Jauss and Iser, see the summary by Robert Holub, 'Reception Theory, School of Constance' in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, 8 (1995) 319. An essay by Wolfgang Iser, 'Interaction between Text and Reader' is reprinted in Finkelstein and McCleery 291. For a discussion of different approaches, see William Sherman, *John Dee, The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance* (Amherst 1995) 53.

⁶ A fuller discussion of the unrepresentative quality of anecdotes is given in chapter 20.

rhetorical effects in mind. The same methodological difficulties apply to the use of published reviews which are often taken as surrogates for ‘reception’ more generally. Although such reviews may be useful for some purposes, such as reconstructing horizons of readerly expectations, or the dominant discursive frameworks within which a particular text was understood and debated at the time of publication, they cannot be assumed to be representative records of the actual reception of the reviewed text by its many other readers. Nor can we recover actual reading from contemporary advice on reading that is to be found in, say, conduct literature, or by examining literary and visual representations of reading, useful though these sources may also be.⁷ In crucial respects, the champions of modern reception theory, which emphasises that it is the reader who makes the meanings, have not yet faced the full implications of their insights. The concept of ‘the reader’ is needed for any investigation and analysis of a culture just as we need ‘the investor’ when we try to understand an economy. But whereas the ‘investor’ of economics is normally deduced from empirical quantitative studies of how real investors have been observed to behave in practice, the ‘reader’ of modern literary studies is seldom more than the reader implied by the text and the paratext.

How then can we trace the influence of texts, books, and reading without becoming presentist, determinist, circular, or anecdotal? How can we break free from the residual power of the fallacy that readers are the inert recipients of meanings created by authors? If, as I suggest, we conceive of a culture as a complex developing system with many independent but interacting agents, including authors and readers, into which the writing, publication, and subsequent reading of a printed text were interventions, then we need a systems approach to understand it.⁸ From a scrutiny of the consolidated empirical records of historic reading we may be able to perceive patterns, to identify hierarchies, and to generate models, partial and provisional though they may have to be. We may be able to develop a conceptual framework from which provisional conclusions can be drawn, the data interrogated and re-interrogated, and the models themselves tested and refined.

The difficulties of applying such an approach in practice are severe. Although concepts such as idea, attitude, opinion, belief, feeling, value,

⁷ Discussed in chapters 14 and 19.

⁸ The basic notions of systems thinking are summarised by Peter Checkland, *Systems Thinking, Systems Practice* (revised edition 1991). ‘The central concept of system . . . embodies the idea of a set of elements connected together to form a whole, this showing properties of the whole, rather than properties of its component parts. Systems thinking is . . . the use of a particular set of ideas to try to understand the world’s complexity – an epistemology which, when applied to human activity, is based upon the four basic ideas: emergence, hierarchy, communication, and control, as characteristics of systems.’

world-view, cultural change, and mentality are serviceable within their limits, there are few easily identifiable units which can be traced through the system. In the case of texts which contain an identifiable cluster of new ideas, such as Adam Smith's *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, we can use normal historical techniques to try to trace how the ideas were spread within society, advocated by converts, adopted by policy-makers, and carried into effect, just as we can trace the invention, development, and industrial application of a newly invented technology such as the printing press or the steam engine.⁹ In the case of most texts, however, and especially the texts of imaginative literature, that were always amongst the most often read, it is hard to identify any but the loosest clusters of ideas, and when we try to trace them into the busy world of mentalities, we quickly lose sight of them in the crowd. Even when we believe we can trace the ideas of one text, we know that readers seldom, if ever, read only one text, and that the meanings offered by the range of texts that they read was seldom fully consistent with one another. Then there is feedback, perhaps the most intractable of all the methodological problems that arise in tracing ideas. Printed texts are the products of their times as well as helping to shape them, authors have potential readers in mind when they write, readers bring expectations to their reading, the environment in which ideas prosper and perish is itself, to a large extent, an outcome of mental factors, including reading, and the notion of a national or group 'culture' implies that there is a large measure of shared stability, as well as development, across the generations.

However, in writing histories of ideas, we have a unit which can be more readily identified and traced. If we could trace print, and understand how certain texts came to be made available in printed form to certain constituencies of buyers and readers, we would have made a good start in narrowing the questions to be addressed in tracing ideas. Books, furthermore, are material goods which were manufactured, sold, rented, and distributed by processes which are receptive to economic as well as to historical analysis. Indeed, since the production and sale of print was the business of an industry with its own economic characteristics, it is to the disciplines and methodologies of the social sciences that we should initially turn. In advocating and adopting this approach, I emphasise that I do not wish to imply that printed books can or should be regarded simply

⁹ The early publication history of Adam Smith's two main works is summarised in appendix 9 'Adam Smith.' For indications of readership in the romantic period see chapter 13. For an example of a case in which an innovative text which is admired today failed to make much of an impact when it was first published, see the discussion of Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* in chapter 14.

as material goods which were manufactured for sale, nor that the governing structures and customary practices of the printed-book industry were the only, or even the main, determinants of the texts which were made available to be read in printed form. The whole literary system of writing, texts, books, and reading, has to be conceived of as existing within wider historical contexts, including what Bourdieu calls the *habitus* of literary production within which, by the interplay of numerous agents, including authors, publishers, and critics, certain texts are accorded value.¹⁰ Nor do I wish to imply that the authors of the past should be regarded principally as economic agents, or to exclude or downplay the contribution of individual agency at any point of the chain that linked authors with readers. To attempt to match the production of printed texts with the weight of influence of that print or to equate numbers of acts of reading with numbers of transfers of textual meaning would be to revert back to the notion of readers as inert recipients of textual meanings which my approach is intended to correct. It would be simplistic too to expect that models which may help to explain the production, distribution, and sale of books can also explain the states of mind which caused texts to be written or which resulted from the reading of those texts and the subsequent diffusion of the ideas.

But just because a model cannot be run mechanistically to provide a full answer to my questions, to take us, as it were, all the way from the minds of authors, through the materiality of print, to the minds of readers, that does not mean that it cannot produce worthwhile results, let alone that the traditional parade or parliament conventions are to be preferred. There are many other advantages. Although it is always likely to be extremely difficult to judge the extent to which the readers of a particular text may have been influenced by it, we can be certain that those persons who had no access to that text cannot have been directly influenced by it at all, but may have been influenced by many other texts to which they did have access. The possible links between texts, print, reading, and mentalities are not symmetrical. If we could discover who read what, we would have a far more secure basis than exists at present upon which to employ other approaches, including traditional critical scrutiny of texts, to try to understand the appeal and assess the effects. An analysis of the printed-book industry, furthermore, can proceed initially without reference to the nature of the texts being produced, the personal characters or motives of individual participants, the rise and fall of firms, or the claims and explanations offered by contemporaries, however honest and sincere they may have been. If we could elucidate and

¹⁰ See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, edited by Randal Johnson (1993).

model the factors which determined which constituencies of readers had access to which printed texts at which times, we would have advanced from explanations which are textual, local, and time-specific to a fuller and more theoretical understanding. Since much of the study will be concerned with attempting to elucidate the long-term constraints and determinants which affected the materiality of texts, I ask to be excused from repeating these qualifications on the many occasions where they arise.

The largest practical obstacle to writing histories of reading has been the absence, in readily accessible form, of the consolidated and comparative quantitative information that is indispensable to any analysis of the kind I suggest. Although, for Great Britain, we have excellent descriptive bibliographies and library catalogues of the titles of English-language books known to have been printed since the fifteenth century, we lack information on costs, prices, print runs, and sales. We have no reliable indices of book prices, even in general changes, for periods before the nineteenth century.¹¹ As the late D. F. McKenzie, one of the founders of modern book history, wrote in his posthumously published work, 'There is still no satisfactory model of the economics of the London [book] trade', and he picked out the lack of information about edition sizes as amongst the worst of many 'crippling deficiencies' from which the subject suffers.¹² I know of no studies of how the changing internal trade customs of the book industry, its marketing policies, and the private intellectual property regime have influenced texts, availability, prices, access, and readerships.

The standard, indeed the only, book on readerships that includes more than a sprinkling of quantified information, remains Richard D. Altick's *The English Common Reader, A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800–1900*, an excellent and pioneering work on which I have frequently drawn and which can still be warmly recommended. But Altick wrote nearly half a century ago; he did no archival work but relied on scattered mentions in printed sources; and he made no claim to be offering consolidated information or economic analysis. That modern writers on reading have made little or no attempt to update, add to, or look behind Altick is a tribute to the strength of his work, but also shows an unfamiliarity with what would be regarded as the indispensable minimum demanded by practitioners in disciplines that attempt to describe, understand, and theorise complex systems. The history of reading is at the stage of astronomy before telescopes, economics before statistics, heavily reliant on a few commonly repeated traditional narratives and favourite anecdotes, but weak on the

¹¹ See Eliot. ¹² *CHBB* iv, 553, 556.



Figure 1. 'Industry'. An allegory of how all knowledge in the arts and sciences depends upon printed books. On the right is an English printing shop in the age of moveable type, showing the writing, composing, type-setting, inking, drying, and pressing. From George Bickham, *The Universal Penman* (1735–41).

spade-work of basic empirical research, quantification, consolidation, and scrutiny of primary information, upon which both narrative history and theory ought to rest.¹³

Although, in the present state of knowledge, it is impossible to write general histories of reading, we may be able to answer at least some of the main questions by making a formal case study of the reading of a particular historical period in a specific culture. Provided it is large enough to encompass both the long-term governing structures and the long-run consequences, a study of one historical period may yield results which have a wider applicability. The period which I have chosen as the central case for my inquiry is the romantic period in Great Britain, roughly the years between the 1790s and the 1830s, a remarkably rich and distinctive period of literary and intellectual history, as contemporaries knew, and one of great change. Suddenly, towards the end of the eighteenth century, the number of men, women, and children who read printed texts began to grow rapidly. The more highly educated members of society read more books, journals, and newspapers

¹³ See the useful collection of Finkelstein and McCleery.

than ever before and on a wider range of subjects. Lower-income groups, whose reading had long been the English-language Bible, short chapbooks, and ballads, now had access to other print including book-length literary texts. When, at around the same time, school education began to make the reading of extracts of English literature a central part of the curriculum, whole communities were able, by means of reading, to make new imaginative escapes from their immediate here and now. The rapid expansion in reading occurred across all strata of society, whether categorised by income, by occupation, by educational attainment, by geographical location, by age, or by gender.¹⁴ If there are links to be found between texts, reading, and resulting mentalities, that is a time when they are likely to be visible.

It was also a time when reading and its likely consequences caused much worry to those in power. During most of the previous three centuries of the print era, the authorities of the state and church had attempted to influence the textual content of the printed material available to be read within their jurisdictions. In general, they advocated that certain mandatory, approved, or recommended texts should be read carefully, regularly, and frequently, preferably under supervision. Although large numbers of texts which provided stories, news, and entertainment were permitted to circulate so long as they did not pass certain limits, reading was seen mainly as a means of advancing religion, morality, and knowledge. There seems always to have been a large, politically powerful, constituency that wished to discourage reading altogether, particularly among the less-well educated.¹⁵ By the end of the eighteenth century, however, not only was more reading occurring in Great Britain than ever before but there appeared to be a change in reading practice. There was no slackening in the rapid expansion of newspapers which had begun in the early eighteenth century, and they now sometimes offered political comment and literary reading.¹⁶ As far as books were concerned, many readers seemed now to prefer to read one after another, without giving them much attention, and for pleasure rather than for instruction. Readers were, it appeared, abandoning the ancient practice of 'intensive reading' in favour of 'extensive reading'.¹⁷ Furthermore, some of the books were textually near or beyond the limits which those in authority regarded as desirable. Similar changes have been noted as

¹⁴ For a fuller discussion of the growth of reading in Great Britain see chapter 6, and in English-speaking North America, chapter 19. For the change in the nature of textbooks used in school teaching, see chapter 7.

¹⁵ See chapter 17. ¹⁶ See chapter 5 and the statistics of periodical production in appendix 8.

¹⁷ The originator of this useful distinction was Rolf Engelsing, *Der Bürger als Leser, 1500–1800* (Stuttgart 1974). Some of the contemporary German comments on the point are quoted and translated by Blanning 133.

occurring at around the same time in other countries in northern Europe and America.¹⁸

For the romantic period we also have a body of contemporary comment on the effects of reading on minds and on subsequent behaviour. Surprised by the suddenness and scale of the change, the politicians, churchmen, teachers, authors, and journalists of the time anxiously weighed the benefits and the dangers. Should the prospect of a more informed population be welcomed as a liberation from ignorance? Could reading help to bind the nation into a more secure cultural and political consensus, and so enable it to escape the violent revolutions which had engulfed France and other countries? Or, as others feared, would the spread of new ideas carried by print destabilise the precarious constructions of belief on which existing political, economic, social, and gender relationships were founded?¹⁹ Would the result be unrealisable demands for greater participation from groups hitherto excluded from decisions which affected them, leading to disappointment, unrest, violence, and national disaster? The romantic period was to see the last sustained attempt by the British state to control the minds of the British people by controlling the print to which they had access.²⁰

Among those whose views are recorded, who were mostly from the higher-income groups, there was much common ground. They were more worried about book-length texts than by newspapers, partly because the state had taken effective fiscal measures to discourage them and had tried to outlaw some altogether.²¹ The reading of books about ancient history, geography, science, and technology would, many considered, produce benefits, as would the reading of the English-language Bible and associated religious works. They disliked the philosophical and historical works of the European Enlightenment which questioned or undermined accepted beliefs, and the pamphlets on current topics which encouraged readers to believe that they could contribute to public debates. Feared too was the reading of plays, poetry, and novels, and other 'romance' which offered readers means of escape into attractive alternative worlds. When literature elevated the feelings of readers, many believed, it could help to sustain

¹⁸ See Reinhard Wittman, 'Was there a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?' in Cavallo and Chartier 284. For the sharp increase in titles published in Germany from about 1760, see the summary by Blanning 142. For North America see chapter 19.

¹⁹ The general anxieties about reading can be seen most vividly in conduct literature, in prefaces to books intended for children and young people, and in school textbooks. See chapters 14 and 17.

²⁰ For the fear of the political effects of literacy and reading, and the attempts of the British state in the romantic period to control minds by controlling reading, see chapter 16.

²¹ For state measures against newspapers, see chapter 16. For newspaper societies, chapter 13.

religious and moral values. But when it conferred an apparent legitimacy on ideas, emotions, and types of behaviour which readers had not previously seen articulated and fixed in print, it became dangerously unsettling.

By the 1820s, it was clear that the surge in reading was not a temporary blip which would soon level off or go into reverse. The romantic period marked the start of a continuing, self-sustaining, expansion, a take-off in the nation's reading equivalent to the take-off in manufacturing production which accelerated at about the same time. By the turn of the nineteenth century, virtually everyone read books, magazines, and newspapers on a regular basis. In the single century Great Britain became a reading nation, one of only a handful to do so at that time.²² The change had occurred in spite of a rapid growth in the size of the population as a whole, and was well under way long before the industrialisation of print manufacturing, universal primary education, and free public libraries.

The take-off in reading in Great Britain has not yet, I would say, been satisfactorily described, nor do we yet have adequate explanations for how or why it occurred when it did. I hope that my study will help to elucidate the issues. However, in order to identify the governing structures which determined the texts that were made available for reading in the romantic period, I have to start several centuries before. I also need to carry the analysis briefly through to the end of the Victorian period, which is when we should expect the effects on mentalities of romantic-period reading to be most visible, and which, as it happened, was also the time when the most famous authors of the romantic period were most read.²³ By 1914, with the arrival of cinema and radio, the uniqueness and hegemony of print was being rapidly eroded, so making any attempt to trace texts and ideas even harder.

In the phrase 'reading nation', I include the men, women, and children in Great Britain, and to a lesser extent, other English-speaking communities in Ireland, North America and elsewhere, who regularly read English-language printed books. Within this English-speaking and English-language-reading world there was both a large degree of political and cultural commonality and a constant exchange both of texts and of books. The reading nation, in the sense I have chosen, was probably always far smaller than the 'literate nation', among whom I include those many others whose reading was largely confined to the reading of commercial documents, manuscript ledgers, accounts, and letters directly associated with their employment, and

²² For the continuing growth of literacy and of reading in the Victorian age, see especially Vincent.

²³ See chapter 21.

to the reading of newspapers.²⁴ The non-reading nation consisted of those members of society whose experiences of written texts were mainly oral and visual, although almost all were also influenced, at school or in church, by texts which derived from printed books. For many men, women, and children of the print era, reading was the only escape from the mental village into which they were born. The boundaries between the non-reading, the literate, and the reading nations as I have defined them for the purposes of the present study, were unmarked, unpatrolled, and constantly shifting, as children, men, and women extended the range of their reading. While concentrating on the romantic period in Great Britain, therefore, the study spans several centuries of the print era in the wider English-speaking world.

It would, of course, have been possible to draw these chronological, geographical, and conceptual boundaries at different places. The largest long-term change brought about by the coming of print, the archival record shows, was the astonishingly rapid growth of periodical publications, journals and newspapers.²⁵ I believe however that my approach of concentrating on books, not only enables long-run systemic features to be identified, but it also allows for the dynamism which occurs both within social groups, as cohorts of children learned to read long texts for the first time and older people ceased to read, and between groups, as new constituencies joined the expanding reading nation. For the romantic period the number of readers, particularly among the higher income groups, was still small compared with later, and a great deal is retrievable about their reading, values, opinions, and attitudes. In attempting to write quantified histories of reading and its effects, and developing a fuller understanding of the political economy of texts, books, readers, cultural formation, and resulting mentalities, the romantic period in the English-speaking world is as promising a central case as we are likely to find.

The first task, without which the inquiry could not have been attempted, has been to establish and consolidate a reasonably comprehensive foundation of quantified information on the production, prices, edition sizes, sales, and circulation of books and other print. I have, accordingly, searched for and examined as many primary sources as I could discover in which such information is to be found, mainly the commercial records of publishing and printing firms. It turns out that over fifty relevant manuscript archives

²⁴ For the difficulties of measuring literacy and relating literacy to reading, see Roger Chartier, 'The Practical Impact of Writing' in Finkelstein and McCleery 118. For the extent to which orality interacted with literacy in early modern England, see Fox.

²⁵ See appendix 8.

have survived, far more than is generally realised, that most have seldom been explored, and some never.²⁶ In addition I have studied the printed or microfilmed transcripts of other relevant archives, including those of the Stationers' Company.²⁷ As far as the romantic period is concerned, with the exception of the specialist books of the university presses, on which I have relied on secondary reports, I am not aware of the existence of any archival sources which are likely to yield information on the kind needed besides those on which I have drawn in the study.

Although most of the printing and publishing archives which survive are incomplete or fragmentary, and in some cases consist of a single ledger, taken as a whole the record of books produced in the romantic period, is astonishingly full.²⁸ It has also been possible to find archival information about the comparative sales of periodicals including newspapers.²⁹ There are, in addition, numerous individual records scattered in printed books, such as collections of printed letters and biographies of authors, on which I have also drawn. Although, except when nothing else has survived, scattered anecdotal information, whose representative quality is necessarily always suspect, can be no substitute for information systematically collected from archives, it has helped to fill gaps. For distribution, renting, and circulation, I have examined the manuscript archival records of a number of commercial lending libraries, book clubs, and mechanics institute libraries, which can be linked to the quantified information now becoming available online on the Library History Database. I have also examined several hundred early nineteenth-century manuscript commonplace books, another primary source which, partly because these private self-made books are seldom found in institutional libraries, has never previously been systematically considered.³⁰

For retail book prices, I have used the printed trade catalogues of the book industry, some of which only survive in unique copies.³¹ Also highly relevant have been the collections of printed prospectuses, advertisements, and other ephemeral print relating to the marketing and sales of books in the libraries of Reading and Oxford universities and elsewhere.³² These can, to some extent, be matched with the printed catalogues of titles and prices which were sometimes bound into books or were printed on their

²⁶ See bibliography: 'Manuscript archives of publishers, printers, and booksellers'.

²⁷ See bibliography: 'Transcribed archival sources, and printed works containing archival information'.

²⁸ See appendices 7 and 9. ²⁹ See appendix 8.

³⁰ See bibliography: 'Libraries' and individuals' manuscript archives and other collections of manuscripts relating to books and reading', discussed in chapter 12.

³¹ See bibliography: 'Book trade catalogues' and 'Book trade catalogues. Popular literature'.

³² See bibliography: 'Rare and ephemeral printed sources'.

temporary covers but were usually removed when the books were rebound, and are, as a result, seldom found in institutional libraries. This source is particularly valuable for the large quantum of book production which took place outside the mainstream London industry, including pirate and offshore publishing, which were not included in trade catalogues or regularly acquired by libraries.³³ Central too to the analysis of the economic behaviour of the industry are the catalogues of the closed trade sales at which the London publishing syndicates auctioned intellectual properties among themselves, of which a few copies, with the achieved prices marked in manuscript, survive in different locations, but which together make a reasonably complete run.³⁴ These catalogues have enabled me to calculate the changing monetary value of particular intellectual properties, such as those in Shakespeare.³⁵

Taken together, the archival and trade sources have not only enabled me to build the quantified factual foundation of costs, prices, print runs, textual controls and intellectual property which is indispensable to my approach, but they also permit a reasonably full analysis of the economics of the book industry during the age of print to be carried out. Rather than referring my readers back, unassisted, to the scattered sources, I have digested the information into a series of appendices. These appendices offer quantified information on all the main genres of printed texts produced during the periods with which I am principally concerned of a comprehensiveness never previously attempted. Extensive although they are, however, they are still necessarily a selection, and the information can be added to by anyone who chooses to do the spade-work.³⁶ My aim in making and publishing the present appendices has not been to pile up pieces of information for its own sake but to provide the indispensable factual basis which enables the archival and printed record to be interrogated, patterns discerned, trends and turning points identified, and emerging conclusions offered and tested. In many cases I have included worked examples selected for their potential usefulness in filling gaps.

By constructing a standard for a typical income of a gentleman in the romantic period, I offer an easy methodology for my readers to assess the impact of the book prices of that time against the then prevailing levels of income and distribution of wealth.³⁷ I also set out in what I hope is easily

³³ Discussed in chapters 16 and 17.

³⁴ See bibliography: 'Closed book industry marked auction sale catalogues with achieved prices marked in manuscript'.

³⁵ See chapter 8. ³⁶ For my suggestions see chapter 22.

³⁷ See chapter 11. See also 457 for a note about money.

usable summaries consolidated information on some of the main economic and regulatory features which determined, or greatly influenced, the nature and behaviour of the printed-book industry, and therefore the nature of texts made available, prices, access and readerships. They include information on production costs, book-renting facilities, the effects on texts of changes in manufacturing technologies, such as the introduction of stereotyping, and the constantly changing regime of state textual controls, fiscal disincentives, and private intellectual property. By engaging directly with this material and the patterns it reveals, I have, on many occasions, come to conclusions which differ from those of literary, cultural, or book historians whose methodological approaches have been different and whose informational base has necessarily been more limited. By including plentiful cross-references in the narrative, I hope to enable my own readers to appreciate the interlocking characteristics of the historic reading system, and to assist them in their intellectual engagement with the evidence. Since they provide information not previously available or consolidated, the appendices are therefore a resource which can be used for helping to answer questions other than those addressed in the present study. Tabular presentation, although seldom used in traditional literary history, has many advantages. It enables factual and statistical material to be presented in non-hierarchical form in ways which reveal long-term historical developments; it provides opportunities for both my empirical foundation and my provisional results to be assessed, added to, replicated, or modified.

The information I have collected and consolidated has enabled my study to proceed systemically, bottom-up from empirical data to identification of patterns to general conclusions, rather than in the top-down mode of proffering generalisations illustrated by examples adopted by predecessors. They not only liberate both me and my readers from a dependency on the univocalism of linear narrative, but unlock the material for other research purposes, so that, my readers, if they choose, can make their own creative searches for other long-run structures, emerging patterns, historical conclusions, and potentially usable models.

For material of this kind, web publication, as a medium, has advantages over print, notably the comparative ease with which additions, corrections, and modifications can be incorporated, and the opportunity an electronic medium gives readers to make searches. I have considered publishing it separately online. Such a method of publication would have enabled the database which I am able to present to be larger and fuller. However, since not all my readers will either have ready access to an online medium or feel the need to consult the factual data base to the same extent, I have decided to

include the appendices at the end of the book, with occasional summarising tables in text. Although I may decide to put the fuller information online later, and so enable the appendices to become the core of a growing research resource, my chosen method of presentation gives my readers the advantages and conveniences of the printed codex, a form of text-copying whose demise has long been predicted but which still appears to be in robust good health.