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Victorian Popular Forms and Practices of Reading and Writing



Working-Class Readers and Literary Culture in North-East England: The Allendale Lead-Miners' Libraries

Lecture et culture littéraire chez les ouvriers du Nord-Est de l'Angleterre : les bibliothèques dans les mines de plomb d'Allendale

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Résumés

English Français

This article investigates the surviving borrowers' catalogues (c.1850–70) of the Allendale lead-miners' libraries, situating these within the wider history of workplace libraries in the North-East of England. It considers popular reading habits in this community and the patterns of borrowing among individuals, suggesting that these give us insight into the way in which working-class readers used libraries, especially those founded through management initiatives, and their reading preferences in the mid-Victorian period.

Cet article examine les catalogues (entre environ 1850 et 1870) des ouvrages empruntés qui ont été préservés dans les bibliothèques des mines de plomb d'Allendale et les analyse dans le contexte plus large de l'histoire des bibliothèques ouvrières du Nord-Est de l'Angleterre. Il porte sur les habitudes populaires de lecture et les modalités d'emprunts dans cette communauté minière. Il donne un aperçu de la façon dont les lecteurs de la classe ouvrière utilisaient les bibliothèques, principalement celles qui ont vu le jour grâce à l'initiative de la direction, et met en



Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : histoire de la lecture, histoire des bibliothèques, littérature de la classe ouvrière, Northumberland, exploitation minière

Keywords: history of reading, library history, working-class literature, Northumberland, mining

Texte intégral

1 'Books were scarce, and newspapers and magazines were a positive luxury', miner and trades unionist Edward Rymer wrote about his child and early adult life in Northern collieries in the 1840s (5). The 1842 Commission Reports, which reported on access to educational opportunities, tended to agree. 'The few [miners] who have had a little education are fond of reading, but they are mostly without the means of obtaining works, there not being circulating libraries, reading rooms, or mechanic institutions,' J. W. Day of Houghton-le-Spring, Durham, told mining inspector J. R. Leifchild. 'One of the most important things which could be done would be the establishment, for the adult, of reading rooms, with books of amusing though instructive character, as "Chambers's Journal", "The Penny Magazine" and others of that class', he added (*Children's Employment Commission* 719). This was an ambition which, over the next two decades, was at least partially achieved. The North-East of England already had a lively literary culture centred on pit life, with broadsides, songs, and poets like Thomas Wilson of Gateshead commemorating mining work and leisure. But with the rapid growth of workplace sponsored reading rooms and libraries during the 1840s and 1850s, as part of the wider early-mid Victorian culture of 'improvement', the involvement of local coal miners in literary activities also grew exponentially. By the 1880s, many Northumberland collieries had at least one active poet or other writer, and many of these poets had grown up with access to a local colliery-sponsored reading room, such as F. J. Kitt, John Hume, and James Brown from Earsdon (village reading room from at least 1857); or Thomas Cochrane, Albert Keyho, Ralph Dowe and George Hall from New Delaval (Mechanics' Institute and Library, from 1872).

2 Reading rooms and libraries did not, however, simply support reading activities. They encouraged other forms of associational culture to emerge—literary societies, mutual improvement societies, debating societies—and these in turn supported miners to become involved in writing and journalism. This article looks at the reading culture and the library records in the lead-mining district of Allendale in Northumberland, using previously unstudied archival materials. The Allendale records provide a rare chance to consider *collective* library borrowing habits in the mid-Victorian period. From these, I draw some preliminary conclusions as to what these mid-century lead miners were 'fond of reading', and why, and then use these to consider the likely reading habits of miners in the many other libraries and reading rooms across the North-East. As the existence of a contemporary poetic anthology, published by working men in Allendale, suggests, these miners' libraries were not operating in isolation from other 'literary' interests. I investigate them here as a case study, to show how these records might inform our interpretation of less comprehensive industrial workplace library records, including those for ironworks libraries, mill libraries, railway institute libraries, and of the wider cultures that they fostered.

The lead-miners libraries are slightly distinct from the colliery libraries, firstly in age, because the Scottish lead-miners libraries in Wanlockhead and Leadhills date back to



the eighteenth century, and secondly in location, because the key lead-mining settlements were often in more isolated rural locations, like Nenthead in Cumbria, where the London Lead Company sponsored one of its many libraries for its employees. The remoteness is important because it means that there were few other options to obtain books, with limited access to stationers, circulating libraries, and alternative reading rooms. Beyond this, however, both the reading rooms themselves, and the way in which employers and managers supported them, are very similar to colliery reading rooms and indeed other workplace reading rooms. As Iona Craig has most recently examined, one of the vital aspects of miners' reading rooms is the tension between their role as a top-down agent of social control, funded and supported by masters and mine-owners on the basis that an educated workforce would be less likely to engage in strikes and disputes; and their role as a bottom-up educational initiative supported by miners and often run by miners' committees.¹ Pro-union mining newspapers, like *The Miner and Workman's Advocate*, in the 1860s, very strongly supported enterprises centred on giving miners access to literature. This paper frequently printed letters about the success of reading rooms, as in one sent by Moses Tatlock, a coal miner in Kearsley, about the anniversary celebration of Ringley Improvement Reading Room. 'By availing ourselves of the advantages held out by our reading room we shall become wiser, and have more self-respect,' one of the Ringley association speakers, miner Thomas Halliday, commented (14 January 1865, 4). An 1865 editorial urged:

Working men, bear in mind that 'knowledge is power'. Read, for reading, says Lord Bacon, 'maketh the full man'. Without reading, a man can never know anything well. The man who reads communes with the greatest and best of mankind. They are his companions. He is ennobled by their association. Their immortal thoughts are his own. Their exalted sentiments find a place—a home—in his bosom. (*Miner and Workman's Advocate*, 29 April 1865, 4)

4 Though this espouses very standard mid-Victorian sentiments about the affective and improving functions of reading, when this particular newspaper discusses 'power', what it means is the power to force changes in miners' working conditions. Men who are 'wiser' and have 'self-respect' through using and running libraries and reading rooms, are more likely to fight for the rights they deserve, in this formulation.

5 This is borne out by a number of examples of trades union activists who were also on their local library committees. At Castle Eden in Durham, to take only one example, the Colliery Literary and Reading Society (originally founded in 1848 with 66 members, unusually including 11 women) was strongly supported by miner and poet Henderson Fawcett. Fawcett was also a well-known trades unionist, giving speeches on mining safety at mass meetings of thousands in the late 1840s.² His dedication to self-improvement, he recalled in an 1862 speech, began at Castle Eden and resulted in him moving to an 'inspector' position rather than remaining a hewer. The Castle Eden Colliery Literary and Reading Society, he suggests, was integral to this. He also assured his listeners in 1862 that though colliery management supported the society, 'We would wish to proclaim to all the world that you left us uncontrolled in the government of the society, and never once assumed the right to control our actions' (*Durham Chronicle*, 10 October 1862, 3), indicating that there was no contradiction in a passionate agitator for miners' rights holding office on a workplace library committee.

6 Through Craig's PhD research, and research for the 'Piston, Pen & Press' project, as well as through important studies by Paul Kaufman, Carole King, Robert G. Hall and others, the extent and influence of such small local libraries and reading rooms has been further uncovered. Much significant research into workplace libraries has focused on Scotland—John Crawford's studies of the Leadhills and Wanlockhead lead-miners'



libraries—and on South Wales, through Hywel Francis’s pioneering work followed by Christopher Baggs’s extensive research. Crawford primarily focuses on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, however, while Francis and Baggs concentrate on the early twentieth century: as Baggs notes, few of the records he investigated predated 1910 (Baggs 1995, 42). In relation to the North-East mining districts, Brendan Duffy has conducted the most extensive research into colliery reading rooms and libraries, and their broad effect on education. Duffy argues that reading rooms were ‘definitely not powerful agencies of educational progress, but do show a growing appetite in the collieries during the 1850s and 1860s for books and newspapers as literacy advanced’ (Duffy 199) and notes the increases in membership, and in both top-down and bottom-up initiatives to found reading rooms, in these mid-Victorian decades. Clifton Stockdale’s thesis on Mechanics’ Institutes in the area, and Martyn Walker’s wider study of the Mechanics’ Institutes, also spend some time discussing their libraries, and there are brief discussions of colliery libraries and reading rooms in the foundational historical studies by John Benson and Alan Metcalfe (Walker, ch. 8, Stockdale, *passim*; Benson 152–54; Metcalfe 38–42). To date, the only work that specifically discusses the Allendale libraries is Christopher John Hunt’s wider investigation of lead-mining history (see Hunt 243–45).

7 As all these researchers note, it is difficult to recover the full history of these local Victorian institutions. Partly this is an issue of naming: a physical space for reading and borrowing books, newspapers and periodicals might be called a ‘reading room’, a ‘library’, a ‘literary institute’, a ‘reading society’ or ‘literary society’, a ‘workmen’s club’, or any combination of these things. Moreover, small-scale libraries and reading rooms in the mining villages were often later incorporated into Mechanics’ Institutes or eventually into Miners’ Institutes. They might also be established, disappear and then re-form, and they frequently moved location as they grew and developed. Metcalfe gives the example of the Seghill Colliery Library, which opened in 1834, closed shortly thereafter, re-opened in 1837, ran until 1843, closed again, and re-opened in 1846 (Metcalfe 38). What tends to survive for early-mid-Victorian institutions, and the sources used in the studies above, are catalogues, lists of rules, and information about the reading rooms from local newspaper reports and mining commission reports. But these do not tell us *what* the miners read, and which books in the relatively few surviving catalogues were popular. Without borrowing records, we can cross-reference surviving catalogues to reach conclusions about the kind of books and periodicals that such reading rooms tended to own, and hence about what the sponsors and committee thought miners ought to be reading or were most likely to read, but we do not know what use was made of library holdings.

8 This is where the Allendale records, held in Northumberland Archives but as yet uninvestigated by scholars, are very important.³ Allen Mill was the smelting mill for the lead mines in the area, located close to Allendale Town, which was the largest settlement. Allenheads, a smaller lead mining settlement, was just over eight miles away. ‘Allendale’ as a name refers to the wider area, the valley of the river Allen. Both locations, and the lead mines surrounding them, were part of the same company enterprise, and both had libraries. More extensive, though still incomplete, records survive for these libraries than is the norm. The Allen Mill library has a catalogue and borrowers’ record, though it does not have a surviving members’ list. While its catalogue could therefore be used to follow the borrowing habits of members via their membership numbers, we do not know who the members were. For Allenheads, however, *both* the borrowers’ record and the members’ list of names and addresses exist, meaning that it is feasible to trace individual members via census records and ascertain their involvement in the lead mining industry. The Allenheads records



therefore supply a very unusual opportunity to research which library holdings working-class members of such libraries actually borrowed. A complete analysis of both sets of these records would be a very substantial project. For this article I traced the individual borrowing habits of ten Allenheads individuals selected at random from the members' list, and supplemented these by including two women borrowers who briefly appeared on the list. I also followed one further male borrower in relation to his intensive flurry of borrowings of Walter Scott's novels. While my conclusions are therefore far from definitive, they are certainly suggestive, and they do shed light on the crucial question of what Victorian workers did with the libraries that their employers founded and supplied.

- 9 Allenheads and Allen Mill libraries were established by Thomas Sopwith, engineer and chief agent for the mine-owners, Thomas Wentworth Beaumont (who died in 1848) and then his son, Wentworth Blackett Beaumont. Sopwith came to work for them in 1846, and with the exception of a period in the late 1850s when he left due to a dispute, remained at Allenheads for over two decades. Sopwith founded four libraries in the area, in 1848 and 1850. A personal friend of Robert Chambers and a strong believer in education and self-improvement, his autobiography expresses particular pride that he had established libraries that catered to children as well as adults:

The establishment of libraries has been a great benefit, and there are now four of them, viz., at Allenheads, Coalcleugh, Weardale, and Allen Mill. I take to myself any merit that may belong to what I have called children's libraries, accompanying the ordinary collection of books, the object being to afford young children a good selection and frequent change of amusing books. (cited Richardson 303)

- 10 This implies that even when library committees selected the books, as opposed to accepting donations from the Beaumonts or other patrons, Sopwith may have influenced the selection. His 1853 lecture on 'Education' delivered at and in support of the Bywell Library and Reading Room, expanded on his views on the importance of improving reading for children and stated that his mining district libraries 'provided books, not only for adults, but for children'. The intent was not simply to educate children but to help young labourers to develop 'an element of carefulness, and an element of cleanliness' by having to take care of the books they borrowed (Sopwith 16–17). Some of the books discussed below—possibly including the popular works of adventure fiction in the library—may therefore have been purchased specifically for younger readers, though most of the identifiable borrowers were adults. Sopwith's lecture also suggests that at least one of the miners' libraries emerged organically from the small adult classes he had set up to train miners in reading, writing, technical drawing and discussion.⁴ In the early years of Sopwith's tenure, he was not uncontroversial: the Allenheads miners were engaged in a bitter dispute and strike in 1849 over Sopwith's appointment of timekeepers to ensure that miners were working full eight-hour shifts. The *Newcastle Guardian* published a number of letters, from Sopwith and from a delegation of the miners, arguing both sides of the question. Despite Sopwith's biographer's claim that he and the miners 'remained on friendly terms' throughout this period, a surviving broadside, 'Miners' Farewell to Allenheads', signed M. Wilson, suggests otherwise:

At doing mischief [Sopwith] is apt
It seems to give him joy;
He the firm bond of friendship snapt
Delighting to annoy.

**

Now we on other sights must look
In a far distant land,



While those we leave behind must brook
The tyrant's stern command

Willing to work—but not to be
Sopwith's devoted slaves,
In a far distant country
We go to make our graves. (Wilson, 'Miners' Farewell')

11 The broadside claimed that fifty-eight Allenheads miners were being forced to emigrate to Illinois, due to Sopwith's tyranny. What effect this dispute might have had on the early years of the library and reading room is impossible to discern, though we might speculate that it meant that more 'radical' miners, those passionately opposed to the imposition of more rules and regulations from above, had either left or were unlikely to become members of an enterprise sponsored by Sopwith with Beaumont's support.

12 The Allenheads membership list for 1849 lists 92 members by name, all male, with new members added up to 1871. Every member was assigned a number and kept that number, irrespective of whether they stopped using the library. The 149 members in 1871 are therefore not representative of the number of active borrowers, which was more in the region of 35–40. Some names on the membership list, like Sopwith (reader number 1) were also clearly supporters rather than borrowers, and were not expecting to use the library themselves. The rules for the libraries do not survive, but membership dues recorded in the catalogues indicate that the cost of subscribing was 2 shillings per quarter. While not a negligible amount for a working miner, for comparison the fee for Mudie's Circulating Library in 1842 was 1 guinea (21 shillings) per year, and this was designed to be cheaper than the alternatives. Buying one three-volume novel would have cost approximately the same as 4 years' membership at Allenheads.⁵ Cross-referencing a selection of names with the 1851 census records, it is evident that membership was spread across the community, including doctors, ministers, teachers and shopkeepers. Tracing every individual with precision is difficult because this community had a number of families with the same surnames and first names, doubtless all related in various degrees. But even brief research indicates that the majority of library members were the lead miners and those working in above-ground professions in the mines or the smelt mill, ranging in age from men in their teens to their forties. Unfortunately the surviving records do not name the library committee, or include the library rules, so it is impossible to know whether this consisted of lead miners, or whether it was generally composed of local worthies: many libraries would have involved the schoolteacher and minister as key committee members, though the Leadhills and Wanlockhead libraries supplied an important model, possibly known at Allenheads, of worker-run libraries. There is also little existing information about the physical space of the libraries, though it is likely that they followed other colliery libraries in housing the books within a reading room, which would also be stocked with newspapers.

13 The surviving catalogue for Allen Mill library begins in 1850–1851, at which point the library had 271 books, and runs until 1864, when the stock had increased to 1,404 books. Allenheads, where the catalogue runs from 1849–1870, had 1,117 books in the last entry. Both catalogues give only handwritten book titles, not authors. This is still relatively modest, compared to larger Mechanics' Institute or other libraries, but is within standard parameters for a small workplace or village library. For comparison, Cambo Subscription Library, founded in 1823 with 31 members, in a Northumberland estate village with collieries nearby, had approximately 1,440 books by 1860. Most of its early books were donations, especially from the Trevelyan family on the estate; like Allen Mill, by this date it had also joined the consortium of small libraries linked to the



Society of Arts in London and received publications from the Society (see *Articles of the Cambo Library and Catalogue*). Wanlockhead miners' library was much larger, but it was exceptional in its scope: by 1850 it had close to 2,000 books, and the nearby Leadhills library provided a similar number (Crawford and James 8). At Allenheads and Allen Mill, the first books were donated by Beaumont, and include runs of periodicals, such as *Chambers's Miscellany* and *The Mirror*, plus books of an 'improving' bent, on history, geography, science and religion. Similar educational works were given by Sopwith and a Thomas Steel. The focus on educational works was standard: Seghill Colliery library in 1834, for instance, had '900 volumes of useful reading. Two magazines are taken in, but no novels are allowed' (*Children's Employment Commission* 613). When the Allenheads and Allen Mill library committees started to purchase books, however, novels were their first choice: a set of Walter Scott's *Waverley Novels*. In 1850–51 library funds also purchased, among other items, fourteen volumes of the *Penny Magazine* and Samuel Johnson's complete works. At both libraries, over the years, 'library funds' were used to expand the fiction stock—Wilson's *Tales of the Border*, sets of Maria Edgeworth's novels, Charles Dickens's novels, Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper's works—and to supply runs of contemporary periodicals, such as *Hogg's Instructor* and *Fraser's Magazine*. This is in sharp contrast to the works donated by wealthier patrons, which, while they include travelogues and histories which were doubtless intended to be entertaining, are far more educationally inclined.

14 Most surviving catalogues of early-mid Victorian libraries run by industrial workplaces, and indeed of Mechanics' Institutes, are similar. Large-scale purchases of 'light' fiction do not become common until later in the century. By 1910, for instance, the Blyth Mechanics' Institute library in Northumberland, also used by local miners, had 3,192 fiction books and fewer than 50 books in each of its scientific and practical sections (Mathematics, Physics, Mining, Manufactures, etc.) (*Catalogue of the Blyth Mechanics' Institute*). What is different about the Allendale catalogues is that they include borrowers' records, supplying a visual representation of what workers wanted to borrow and how they borrowed it. I use 'borrowed' rather than 'read', because borrowing a book from the library does not, of course, necessarily mean that the borrower read it before it was due for return. In the case of periodical borrowings, as with John B. Lee, who took out 6 volumes of *Chambers's Miscellany* in 1863, or John Fairless, who took out 5 volumes of *Hogg's Instructor* in the same year, we do not know whether these readers were interested in the *whole* periodical, or were looking for a particular kind of article. We also do not know whether library members were borrowing books for themselves, or for family members to read. When Joseph Gill, a miner aged 28 in the 1851 census, borrowed *Cottage Cookery* in 1851, Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) in 1853 and Grace Aguilar's *Woman's Friendship* (1850) in August of 1856, did he intend to read these himself, or was he borrowing them for his wife Jane, who briefly replaces him in the membership list in 1857–58, or for his oldest daughters, who would have been aged 11 and 9 in 1853 and 16 and 14 in 1857? As Sopwith's accounts make clear, these libraries were not only intended for the male members' own use, but for the wider community, including families and children.

15 In general, the patterns of borrowing in the sample of members I considered follow two paths. In the first path, a reader borrows a number of improving books in the first years of the library's operation (when most of its stock fell into this category), stops borrowing and paying dues, and is eventually moved off the list when it was reviewed in the early 1860s. Reader 16, William Roddam, who was probably the millwright aged 31 in Allendale in the 1851 census, follows this pattern. 1849 saw Roddam borrow the *Pursuit of Knowledge, Abercrombie's Essays*, vol. 2 of *Beckmann's History of Inventions* and one volume each of the *Penny Magazine* and *Chambers's Magazine*.



These were all donations to Allenheads from patrons. In 1850–51 Roddam made a concerted effort with William Paley's *Works*, borrowing volume 4 and then volumes 2 and 3. He took out volume 4 of Paley again the following year, and then his borrowing stopped. (There is no William Roddam with a similar birthdate to the Allendale millwright in the 1861 census, so it is possible he emigrated, or that he is the same William Roddam who died in Northumberland in 1858). Francis Hewitson (reader 52), in contrast, is in Allendale as a lead miner in both 1851 and 1861, but his borrowing also stopped in 1851–52. Up until then, he seemed interested in Sopwith and Beaumont's donated works of travel literature and accounts of foreign lands: he borrowed several volumes of the *Colonial Library*, a book on *Egyptian Antiquities*, the *Travels of Marco Polo*, and the *Voyages of Drake*. Then he stopped paying his membership, and was removed from the list in the 1859–60 session. Reader 77, Joseph Snaith—there are two miners of this name who are possible library members, one aged 64 in 1851 and one aged 40—also borrowed Paley's *Works* vol. 2 and 3 in 1849–50, and several volumes of *Conder's Modern Traveller*. His borrowing also stopped in 1851–52, though he paid the subscription for one further year; his name is removed in 1859–60.

16 In the early years of the library's operation, 1849–51, there are some similarities between the borrowers I tracked. Three of them borrowed Paley's *Works*, which emerges in these years as the most-borrowed work of science/religion; unsurprising, given Paley's standing in this period as an essential, though debated, authority on science and religion. The most noticeable pattern is that all but one reader borrowed at least one volume of a periodical. Their choices were limited to the four periodicals owned by the library at this time: *The Mirror*, *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* and *Chambers's Miscellany*, and the *Penny Magazine*. William Ritson Jr, for example, borrowed only periodicals in 1850–51: two volumes of *Chambers's Miscellany*, and one each of *The Mirror* and the *Penny Magazine*. *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction*, a London periodical started in 1823 with the intent to 'enable readers of the humblest circumstances to become acquainted with the current and expensive literature of the day', was the most popular periodical holding in these early years.⁶ This is interesting because it suggests that borrowers did not see periodicals, even though they responded immediately to issues of their day, as dated: many issues of *The Mirror* borrowed in these years were 20–30 years old. This applied to all periodicals, though as the library invested in contemporary magazine publications, such as Charles Dickens's *Household Words*, these were borrowed more often. But readers still returned to earlier volumes. Frances Harrison (reader 127), for instance, a house servant at Allenheads Hall (the home Sopwith built for his family), borrowed *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* vol. 8 in 1860, a volume first published in 1840 and one of the original set donated by Beaumont on the library's foundation. Borrowers also did not tend to read sets of periodicals in order of publication. Emerson McMillan, a lead miner aged 19 in the 1851 census, borrowed 27 volumes of *The Mirror* between July 1849 and June 1851, but not in sequence, even though copies in sequence were available. His first year's borrowing was, in order, volumes 20, 36, 25, 35, 6, and 7. By the time he borrowed the first volume of this periodical, he had already borrowed seven later volumes.

17 Of the factual and educational works borrowed, literature dealing with travel or foreign countries is far more popular than other genres. Only two readers did not borrow from these categories, and one of these only borrowed 3 works in total during these years, two of which were periodicals and one volume of the *History of England*. When my sample of readers continued to borrow books after 1851, however, there is a marked change in their reading habits, with a very significant shift to fiction. Daniel Defoe, Walter Scott, and Charles Dickens all start to appear with regularity, alongside adventure novels by Frederick Marryat and James Fenimore Cooper. Reader 90, for



instance, John Pearson, became a regular borrower of fiction from 1851–52, when he borrowed Cooper's *The Pilot* (1824), a new purchase, up until 1857–58, when he borrowed Harriet Beecher Stowe's two abolitionist novels, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856). As this list of novels shows, the library's fiction stock was transatlantic; there was little distinction between purchases of British or American popular fiction. There are multiple John Pearsons in this community in the 1851 census, all working in lead-mining. Several are in their early teens in 1851, so it is entirely possible that this Pearson was one of the child readers that Sopwith took pride in. In these years Pearson also read novels by Marryat, Dickens, and others, and a range of other works, including works on foreign travel (*Views of Modern and Ancient Egypt, New Zealanders*), religion (*The Gospel Worthy of Acceptation, Devout and Holy Life*) and science (vol. 8 of Humphrey Davy's *Works*, Jane Marcet's *Conversations on Natural Philosophy* (1816)).

18 Pearson is one of the second group of readers in my sample, who borrowed books more often and with more seeming enthusiasm, and who particularly tended to borrow relatively new (in terms of when the library purchased them, not necessarily when they were published) works of fiction. Joseph Gill, a miner born in 1823, is one of these borrowers. He actively borrowed at least one book, and usually more, every year until 1857–58, when Jane Gill's name replaces his in the borrowers' records. This was exceptional and due to his death: in the 1861 census, Jane Gill is a 'lead ore miner's widow'. (Only one other woman, Harrison, is on the members' list, from 1859–67, and she was an active borrower for just two years, 1859–61). In 1859–60 Jane Gill's name is removed. No subscription had been paid in 1858–59, and perhaps it was too expensive in her circumstances. Also in this second class of borrowers is the most prolific borrower in the early years of my survey, Emerson McMillan, who joined the library as a 17-year old miner. His father and two brothers were also miners. As noted above, McMillan was an avid borrower of *The Mirror* for the first years of his membership, but as soon as the library acquired the *Waverley Novels* his allegiance switched. In the summer of 1851 he started borrowing Scott, and he went through 28 volumes of Scott's novels—there were 46 volumes in the series—by July 1852. The only break in this run of Scott was when he borrowed Dickens's *American Notes* in spring 1852. Though he never again borrowed as many works in one year, he continued to be one of the more regular borrowers, reading widely across the library's periodicals and popular fiction (including Marryat, Bulwer Lytton, more Dickens, Defoe, Fenimore Cooper and *Don Quixote*). He borrowed the occasional work of history or religion, but never more than once a year.

19 One of the most striking observations that can be made from the wider borrowing records is that among individual authors, Walter Scott was and remained the writer most likely to attract what we might now call 'binge-reading', where a borrower worked their way through a substantial number of Scott's novels in succession. Thomas Dixon (reader 95, possibly the lead-ore smelter aged 35 in 1851, though this is a common name in the area) started reading Scott in the autumn of 1852, and borrowed 24 Scott volumes between October and April 1853. John B. Lee, who may be the son of the miller (John Bunting Lee), aged 19 in 1851, or could be one of the three John Lees in their twenties who were lead-miners, had a run of Scott reading the year before, 1850–51. Over the months from July–December 1851 he borrowed volumes 21, 22, 2, 3, 19, 20, 23, 24, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34 and 35. Scott's novels were not published in single volumes but across 2–3 volumes, so the reason for some of these sequences is because Lee was borrowing different parts of the same novel—31–32 was *Quentin Durward* for instance, and 33–34 *St Ronan's Well*. Outside this, the *Waverley Novels* did not need to be read in sequence, but the out-of-sequence reading may also be because Scott's novels



were popular with other borrowers. What is especially interesting here is that the dates of Lee's borrowing coincide with McMillan's interest in Scott. This is a small community, and whichever local Lee is this particular borrower, all the possibilities were within a few years of McMillan's age. Might these borrowing records show a (competitive?) friendship between two readers, who were discussing Scott with each other?

20 Without a full study of the entirety of these records, conclusions are necessarily speculative. Nonetheless, even a partial investigation demonstrates points that are vital for the study of working-class reading cultures. Most importantly, if the patterns in these borrowing records were repeated in similar workplace libraries, it would suggest that what workers read was not what the employers and patrons of these libraries and reading rooms primarily wanted them to read. There are years in the records when none of Sopwith's series of educational donations were borrowed. These records also suggest that such libraries were used by whole families, and that stock was sometimes purchased with an eye to the wives and children of the workers in male-dominated industries, not the men themselves. Though women in mining families could not access the libraries without a male relative in the industry, they did have informal access to means of self-improvement and to literature. And the records highlight that, besides newspapers (which would have been read on-site, not borrowed), workers were interested in periodicals and in fiction. The fiction and periodicals did not have to be 'new' in the sense of just-published, but the preferred novels had strong narratives of adventure and romance. And even in the 1850s, now remembered as the decade of Dickens, the Brontës, Gaskell and Eliot, it was Walter Scott who continued to be exemplary of fiction worthy enough for a management-led workers' library to invest in it, but populist enough that the workers genuinely wanted to read it.

21 The connection between the foundation of libraries near a particular workplace or village, and other ways of participating in literary culture, is clear in the anthology signed from West Allendale in 1851, *The Poetic Treasury: Being Select Pieces of Poetry from One Hundred Different Authors*. Hunt states that the anthology was published by local lead miners, though there is no firm evidence for this in the anthology itself. Sopwith could, however, well be the 'literary gentleman' mentioned in the preface as advising the compilers, and they certainly state that they are from the working classes, and that the intent of the anthology is to 'induce the working classes of our district to cultivate an acquaintance with *real poetry*' (*Poetic Treasury* iv) because of its improving qualities:

And indeed we know of no body of men on whom poetry can have so good an effect as the working classes; for after a man has toiled through the day, and returns home at night, however conscious he may be of his innocence and rectitude, he is fully sensible of the difficulties of earning a living by the sweat of his brow, and has sometimes even too much anxiety about the things of this life; but let him occasionally read some of the best of poetry, and it will soothe the irritating cares that depress his spirits—it will refine his feelings—purify his affections—and sometimes mentally transport him to those blessed regions 'where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest'. (*Poetic Treasury* v)

22 The miners' libraries did contain some works of poetry by established poets (Goldsmith, Pope, Milton, Burns), but these were not especially popular as loans compared to fiction. What the contents of this anthology suggest is that its compilers found these poems, many of which are anonymous, in periodicals, newspapers, or reprinted on ephemeral forms like broadsides. *The Poetic Treasury* includes extracts from canonical authors, like Shakespeare, Milton and Cowper, and by very popular contemporary writers of short lyrics, like Felicia Hemans, Henry Wadsworth



Longfellow, and Eliza Cook. The collection centres around religious and inspirational verse. It does, however, include some working-class writers (Ebenezer Elliot, Charles Swain, Alexander Smart) and a notable number of poems on slavery and abolition, including two anonymous poems attributed to 'A Slave'. These are by the enslaved Black southern poet George Moses Horton. Horton's poems were reprinted in the American press and in abolitionist magazines, not always with his name—he is sometimes identified as simply 'A Slave Poet', as here—so it is probable that the compilers encountered poems like his 'On the Death of a Young Slave Girl' in a transatlantic magazine or British reprint from an American newspaper, though no obvious source can be traced. Comparisons between the position of slaves in the southern U. S., and miners in Northern Britain, were not uncommon in strike and union songs and poems: one of the broadsides supporting the 1844 Northumberland and Durham miners' strike, Henderson Fawcett's 'Reason's Claim', opens by describing the miners as 'ill-used slaves' and argues that the 'Liberty' granted to Britain's slaves in the Caribbean has not been extended to workers at home. There is therefore an edge to the anthology's strong support for abolition, though abolitionism in the early 1850s would also have been an uncontroversial political cause that could unite masters and men, as opposed to party politics or labour disputes.

23 The *Poetic Treasury* shows that at least some of Allendale's local working population were in possession of considerable literary capital and were familiar with a wide selection of poems. The library catalogues indicate that while the number of miners who borrowed regularly and extensively was not that high, compared to the thousands working in the mines, aspirational working men and their families did have cheap and local access to a variety of literature. Allenheads and Allen Mill have no examples—yet—of individuals whose lives were altered due to access to a reading room. There are, however, many instances of this from elsewhere in Northumberland. Fawcett is an example. So is Ralph Dowey, briefly mentioned above, who was a poet, 'omnivorous reader', trades union leader, and associated with the New Delaval Mechanics' Institute, and probably the Seaton Delaval Reading Room and Mechanics' Institute also. He rose from being a hewer to being a deputy overman. Matthew Tate, a miner who became a journalist and well-known local poet, is another instance. He is probably the author of the 'Notes from Blyth' *Morpeth Herald* column, in which the author recalls that 'When a lad, a New Delaval deputy advised me to read Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, and I borrowed the three volumes from the New Delaval Library and read them through, and that reading opened out a new world to me' (*Morpeth Herald*, 18 May 1901). Thomas Burt, later M. P., and author of an important autobiography, returned to Seaton Delaval in the same year that a colliery reading room opened, 1851, and probably used it to acquire his knowledge of Shakespeare, Burns, Scott, Milton, Mill, Carlyle, Emerson and Channing.

24 The value of these libraries declined as the industry that sponsored them declined, and with the later rise of the public library system. For aspirational young miners born in the early-mid nineteenth century in Northumberland and Durham, however, such colliery libraries and reading rooms were a stepping stone both to effective activism, in terms of writing speeches and journalism, and to higher-level and better-paid jobs in the industry. As these borrowing records suggest, libraries might be used more for entertainment than specifically for education. But through their periodicals and their wider stock, as well their newspaper reading rooms, they kept men and women in small colliery villages, at the periphery of the literary cultures of London and Edinburgh, in touch with culture, politics and society in Britain and farther beyond. They gave those who could not have afforded to buy these books and magazines, the means to develop a cosmopolitan outlook and an awareness of other possibilities, opening out wider visions



to lead-mining families whose way of life dated to the eighteenth century, but was on the cusp of drastic change. In 1896 Allenheads mine closed, as an effect of the waning of the lead-mining industry in Britain; the libraries had likely closed before this date. The children who may have used Allenheads in the 1850s could have spent most of their career in the lead mines, but their children would not.

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Notes

1 Iona Craig, 'Control and Enlightenment: Nineteenth-Century Miners' Reading Rooms,' *Journal of Victorian Culture*, forthcoming summer 2022.

2 See, for instance, reports in the *Newcastle Guardian and Tyne Mercury*, 22 September 1849 and 22 June 1850.

3 At the time when Hunt published his 1970 study, the only significant secondary work to mention these libraries, the survival of these records was not known. Hunt comments that 'No catalogues appear to survive' for the Allendale libraries (245).

4 The origin of these small classes was not organic. Sopwith states that they sprang from him requiring a certain number of young men to adopt temperance principles if they wanted him to assist with bail for a fellow-worker accused of a drunken murder. According to his account, the men then came to him and took his advice to establish mutual improvement classes, which he loosely oversaw (Sopwith 21).

5 Hunt notes that the 'subsistence payment' for a hewer in the early years of Sopwith's employment was 40s per month, this excluded additional income from exceeding the agreed amount of output (Hunt 68). Miners were in general better paid than many low-income workers in this period, though the nature of their contracts made their total pay unpredictable and their employment was precarious.

6 'Preface', *The Mirror*, vol. I (1822–23). *The Mirror* contained short entertaining and lightly instructive articles on topics including politics, foreign lands and customs, verse, short fiction, and satire. It has a strong London focus. At 2d per issue, this was a cheaply produced paper.

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