

Running Up Eyre Street

Reading Sheffield chair Mary Grover gave this paper at The Leeds Library's conference celebrating its 250th anniversary, on 21 September 2018.



I can remember mum and dad, I remember them thinking which books should go. They said, “That is for Betty, Paula and Cecily to decide. If they want them they won’t go, they should decide, but we’ll tell them it’s needed for the country.” [\[Betty b. 1925\]](#)

The paper shortage that cut the supply of books to wartime readers also heightened a sense of the value of reading. Before the van appeared on Saturday to collect books to be pulped, Betty and her sisters had a heavy responsibility: to choose which of their reading pleasures was precious enough to imperil the country.

This paper by myself and Val Hewson draws on the research done by Reading Sheffield over the last seven years. Funded by Sheffield charities and Sheffield Hallam Humanities Research Group, our team has collected reading memories in Sheffield from 64 people born between 1919 and 1945. You will find them all on our website, www.readingsheffield.co.uk. Inevitably the choices of all our readers were affected by the war but very few were asked to make such grave choices as Betty and her sisters who were in the privileged position of having books in the house. Most of our readers had few or no books to pulp or not to pulp.

[Jocelyn](#) had even more books than Betty. Of a similar age, she was born into the steel aristocracy and lived in a large house full of books on the fringes of the city. Petrol rationing made the libraries used in peacetime less 'handy' as she put it so, on her return from her boarding school, itself evacuated to Cornwall without the school library, the teenage girl explored the books on her mother's shelves, Mary Webb and the classics. Rather reluctantly she acted on her father's recommendation that she read the adventures of Henty and Surtees ('heavy-going' as Jocelyn put it).

But there was so little choice. And I think that's one of the things we forget now 'cos there are so many books of every kind, good and bad. And then there were very, very few.

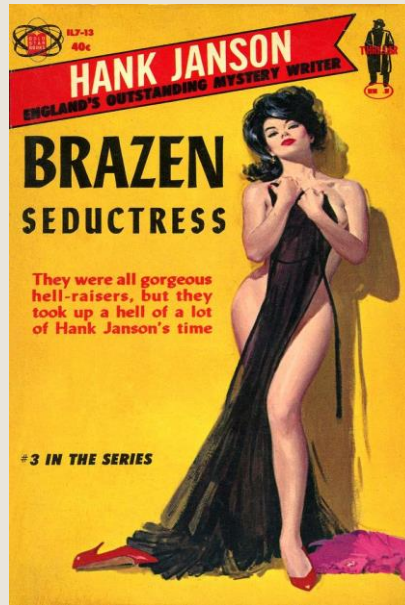
The war impinged on the reading experiences of our interviewees in ways that often seem contradictory. Clearly the paper shortage, the lack of funds to buy new books, petrol rationing and scarcity of new titles limited access to books. In Sheffield too, children faced an extra barrier when, as a safety measure, the Council closed their libraries and moved some of the junior stock to suburban centres. But in many ways the war enabled access to books previously unexplored and above all, sharpened intellectual curiosity as readers sought to understand the world that was breaking in upon them.

For most of our male interviewees the war meant a geographical dislocation which sometimes led to a discovery of genres never before encountered. Though most of the ex-servicemen describe reading little while on service, [Peter](#)'s experience was different. He is fairly dismissive of the NAAFI libraries but shared with us, rather apologetically:

...unfortunately a lot of the books I read I wouldn't admit to reading today because they were all sorts of, what shall we say, blue books and very blue books ... In the NAAFI areas and quarters you could get paperbacks which were the modern, y'know, genre.

In the post war period of military service Hank Janson's hard-boiled novels are quite often mentioned in groups with which we have met. Their titles tell us all about their genre, style and content.

Hank Janson



They have all been recently reprinted – each a clunky pastiche of Hammett and Chandler, but with more sex. This kind of literary entertainment would have been taboo in Sheffield public libraries and even in the tuppenny libraries, such as the local Red Circle which supplied men with Western and horse-racing thrillers. Accounts of Red Circle use suggest that men’s fiction was collected by wives or daughters while the man was at work. Whereas Riders of the Purple Sage would have caused no blushes, it was difficult to imagine a female relative feeling comfortable walking up busy Snig Hill with a copy of Broads Don’t Scare Easy.

One of the ways in which military service could improve the lives of combatants was by teaching basic literacy. Two of the men I have interviewed were involved in this work. It was with one of Janson’s novels that my next door neighbour, a professional teacher in civilian life, lured an unconfident serviceman to tackle print. But, as often as not, active service was far from the NAAFI and the opportunity to read. Malcolm at the age of 17 joined the crew of a mine-sweeper. He has no memories of any reading on board but he took with him one book.

I had it throughout the war until [pause] we were anchored, ... and we drifted and the bottle of ink that I had went all over the pages of Palgrave’s Golden Treasury, the copy that I had so that was the end. I’ve got another copy but it’s not the same. But that was the only book. I didn’t have a Bible although I was a churchman.

One of our only two interviewees to gain a post-graduate qualification, Malcolm had failed his 11+. He had had to leave his council school at 14. For him and for the vast majority of our readers the quality and availability of libraries were critical to their access to books. It was their good fortune that Sheffield Libraries were, at the outbreak of war, in the guardianship of a remarkably gifted librarian.

In 1927 Joseph Lamb took over the role of Chief Librarian from Richard Gordon. Gordon had rescued the service from neglect in 1921 and Lamb built on the work of his friend when he succeeded him. It is due to the foresight of Joseph Lamb that Sheffield Libraries satisfied the needs of those who were able to access a library in the war years. At the onset of war enrolments increased. Between September and December 1939 there were 30 to 50 enrolments a day. It was feared that air raids were imminent; entertainment was therefore curtailed.ⁱ Libraries offered distraction and comfort. They also offered opportunities to understand what was happening and why. Even though opening hours were reduced, from ten to nine hours a day, suburban branches in particular were seen as safe. Sheffield Council responded to this, opening by February 1940 one new branch library and twelve part-time 'library centres'.

The city was fortunate that its libraries came through the war relatively undamaged. Even during the Sheffield Blitz raids of December 1940, only one library centre, the Manor, was destroyed, with the loss of 300 books. The rest sustained minor damage. The 1934 Central Library, 'although bracketed in lines of flames from the Moor and High Street', escaped too.ⁱⁱ There had been, Lamb noted, a falling off in borrowing in the first week of war - 'less than two-thirds the normal daily average' – but this was a temporary reduction. Families were preoccupied by preparing for the blitz they believed was imminent: constructing blackout and shelters. As people settled to their new wartime existence, and dances and the like started up again, borrowing went up. There is evidence that adults joined the library who had never thought of doing so before the war. As [Julia](#) notes: 'My mother borrowed books from the library in the war, and, you know, afterwards as well', the implication being that this was not the case before war broke out. By November 1939, the number of books issued was 59,332, only 417 fewer than in November 1938, and totals continued to rise.

What were all these people borrowing? Both fiction and non-fiction were popular.

Readers continued to probe the causes of the war. German, Czech, Polish and Finnish histories were all borrowed. 'Since September, 1938,' the Sheffield Telegraph said, 'there has been a great demand

for books on world affairs. First-hand accounts of the rise of Nazism, such as *Inside Europe* (1936) by John Gunther, *Insanity Fair* (1938) by Douglas Reed and *Reaching for the Stars* (1939) by Nora Waln were much requested, as was *Mein Kampf*.ⁱⁱⁱ The Telegraph said that 'the war has caused such a rush on non-fiction books at the Central Library that some stocks have had to be heavily duplicated'. As books wore out, replacing them was hard and costly, given paper shortages. To make matters worse, the massive air-raids over London destroyed many publishers' stocks. Sheffield was fortunate that the far-sighted Joseph Lamb had early on bought a vast amount of fiction – enough for all the new library centres and 40,000 books in reserve - at nominal prices from publishers keen to empty their warehouses.

Mary b 1921

Daughter of printer and bookseller

1931 printing firm goes out of business

1935 Mary leaves school to train as secretary

1937 Opens her *Confession Book*

1936-42 Records every book read



The turn to non-fiction is illustrated by two documents shared with us by [Mary](#), 18 when war broke out. Mary had had to leave school at 14. The failure of her father's printing business meant that her private reading became her education. As for many of our readers that sense of the significance of personal reading was reflected in meticulous records of what was read. Unlike most of our readers, she had a group of friends who were also readers. In 1937 at 15 years old she was established as a typist with some disposable income to pay for visits to the neighbouring dance hall. There she met boys educated at the top grammar school for boys in Sheffield: King Edward VII. A delightful way of fostering her friendships was to set up a 'Confession Book' in which the boys (and some girls) inscribed their personal tastes, in music, literature, music and all sorts.

DATE 27th Oct. 1937.

I Confess That :-

My full name is John B. Lee.
 - age is 16 y^r. 5 m.
 - hair is fair - light brown.
 - eyes are blue.
 - hobby is table-tennis.
 - ambition is Road Transport.
 - pet aversion is Sewing Music.
 - favourite author is Political Writers [Mosley]
 - composer is Duke Ellington
 - radio star is Astor King.
 - film star is Gaby Bonnet.
 - dance band is Duke Ellington.
 - tune is St. Louis Blues.
 - idea of happiness is A Good Smoke.
 - misery is bad cold.
 - girl I like best is Bad Kate Peters.
 - boy "no special one"
 I shall marry for a happy family.

Most of the choices are of predictable best sellers: Farnol, Hay, Wallace, Sabatini still going strong.

Favourite authors 1936-7		
46 entries Mary's Confessions Book		
One mention		Two mentions
Michael Arlen	Professor Law	Anne Duffield
T C Bridges	Mosley	Jeffery Farnol
Charteris	Netta Muskett	Ian Hay
Christie	Beverley Nichols	Edgar Wallace
Cronin	Omar Khayyam	
Dell	J B Priestley	
F H Dimmock	Margaret Pedlar	Three mentions
John Drinkwater	Denise Robins	Charles Dickens
Constance Evans	R L Stevenson	David Hume
George Foster	Maurice Walsh	Mussolini
Nat Gould	P G Wodehouse	Rafael Sabatini
Bruce Graeme		
Rider Haggard		
Sydney Horler		

To another of our interviewees, [David Flather](#), born like Jocelyn into one of Sheffield's leading steel manufacturing dynasties, such authors were old hat, belonging to his father's generation. The non-fiction reading is more up-to-date; Mussolini is mentioned four times and John Lee declares himself to be interested in political writers in general, Mosley in particular.

In Mary's second document, listing all the books that she read from May 1936 to the middle of 1942, we can map in some detail not only the transition from teenage to adult reading but from reading for pure pleasure to reading for a wide range of purposes, many of which were shaped by the war.

Apr-39	Essays in Popular Science	Huxley, Julian
Apr-39	By Bus to the Sahara	West, Gordon
Apr-39	Let's See if the World is Round	Mielche, Hakon
May-39	The Isles of Scilly	Mothersole, Jessie
May-39	Mass Observation Britain	
May-39	The Mortal Storm	Bottome, Phyllis ^{VAH1}
May-39	Debits and Credits	Kipling, Rudyard
Jun-39	I was Hitler's Prisoner	Lorant, Stefan
Jun-39	Right Ho Jeeves	Wodehouse, P G
Jun-39	Discord and Harmony	Hamilton, Cosmo

Throughout 1936 and 1937 while compiling her Confession Book, Mary read virtually nothing but books by P. G. Wodehouse, Beverley Nichols, Ian Hay and Edgar Wallace, about six a month. In 1938 non-fiction makes an occasional appearance in the shape of biographies of Rasputin, T. E. Lawrence and Lenin. But during the second half of 1938 she loses all interest in adventure or romantic fiction. The fiction she does occasionally read tends to the comedic: John Glyder, Michael Arlen and J. B. Morton's satire on the Oxford Movement: Skylighters. By the beginning of 1939, like other library users, she is clearly reading with an urgent purpose, to inform herself about the world beyond Sheffield and to try to understand the appalling course of events. She is attracted to biography, travel and intellectual debate. Deslisle Burns' Democracy, its defects and advantages (1929) is the first of many discursive works that dominate her reading throughout the next two years. Apart from a prolonged outbreak of frivolous reading in June 1939 we do indeed get the impression that the lead up to and outbreak of the war inspired a turn to the serious and non-fictional. Mary's reading, like that of most other library users, falls off dramatically in the first months of the war - no titles recorded at all for November 1939. It is possible she stopped recording her reading in the first half of 1940. When she resumes her notebook in August 1940 her diet is as serious as it was in the lead up to war. In 1941 her reading is wide ranging. The majority of books are now non-fiction (for example Julian Huxley's What I Dare Think and R.W.B. Clarke's The Economic Effort of the War but there is a

return to Dornford Yates and following a reading of Julian Huxley's *Democracy Marches* she devours, at the beginning of 1942, *Gone with the Wind*. The juxtaposition of the two titles is a reminder that the novel's appeal was not simply the romance and the epic film but its topicality - set as it is at a time when, to its protagonists, civilisation itself seemed to be under threat.

As early as the autumn of 1939, some readers were already looking ahead. 'Among readers studying theories for a new and better Europe an exceptional number of requests have been made for Streit's *Union Now*.' Clarence Streit was an American journalist covering the League of Nations. Disturbed by nationalism, Streit proposed in his 1938 book that the leading democracies and economies should form a federation.^{iv} People were also thinking about the war effort. The Council approved the borrowing of books from the Reference Libraries.

Books are wanted on the Navy, Army, Air Force, first aid, fire fighting, and balloon barrage work. Men who are training for semi-skilled positions in the armament factories have made requests for books dealing with their subjects.

Young people were 'trying to continue their studies in spite of difficulties', bringing their reading lists to libraries. Many schools were given over to civil defence. [Edna](#) at one of the leading girls' grammar schools describes the damage to the school's resources.

When the army took over, we felt that their main object was to rid the school of all its books, files and paper. These were literally thrown outside (later dumped in Abbeydale Council School). Many were beyond repair or completely destroyed. The stock books were never found.

The children and teachers had to make do with informal classes in private houses or church halls. Schools and junior libraries were closed in September 1939.^v The closure of so many sources of community life inspired the search for ways of making your own entertainment at home. The 1939 *Telegraph* article quoted earlier, notes that readers 'are asking for and reserving books from the *Books for the Home Front* pamphlets'. These guides were produced by Sheffield Libraries on a variety of subjects from history to handicrafts.

When a check was made recently it was found that out of 47 books on card games only 10 were available. There were five books out of 21 on fireside fun and only 19 on vegetable gardening out of 95. It was also found that only four books on Bridge were available out of a total of 34, three on party games out of 17, two on billiards out of 9, three on chess out of 54, and six on dancing out of 35.

Finally, there was escape in the form of fiction. 'It was recently found that 11 out of every 12 volumes on the Central Library stock were in the hands of borrowers.' Classics were popular:

... the libraries' 10 copies of [Lorna] Doone were all on issue, also the full stock (six copies) of Adam Bede and the eight copies of *The Cloister and the Hearth*. *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* are in great demand. Of the stock of 89 Dickens books 18 were out. Five out of 205 Galsworthy books were out.

As we have seen, libraries were often wary of light fiction, leaving it to the commercial tuppenny libraries. But, while promoting cultural standards in general, Joseph Lamb had championed popular fiction for years, on the grounds that it drew people in. He had the vast, cheaply-acquired stock mentioned above, and we know from one of his staff that he was, for example, 'buying forty copies of the latest Edgar Wallace' for the Central Lending Library.^{vi} According to the Sheffield Libraries report for 1939-47, the most popular fiction books over the war were: *Gone with the Wind* (Margaret Mitchell, 1936) (the only one mentioned by our interviewees), *How Green Was My Valley* (Richard Llewellyn, 1939), *The Rains Came* (Louis Bromfield, 1937), *All This and Heaven Too* (Rachel Field, 1938) and *War and Peace* (Tolstoy, 1869). All, apart from *War and Peace*, were also popular films of the period.

By 1945-46, all library records were broken, with 3.75 million issues. Lamb thought that Sheffield's 'reading throughout the war did not differ to any marked extent from that of previous years'.^{vii} Fred Hutchings, his deputy in the early war years, took a different view:

... war became a release spring, taking the compression from dull lives and making people think beyond their narrow corners into the world around them.^{viii}

A number of our readers' memories bear out Hutchings' view. They suggest that children growing up in the war engaged with the newspapers that their parents were reading for example, with an urgent sense that they needed to make sense of what was going on around them. [Jim](#), eight in 1944, reads his father's copy of the *Express*:

And I can remember reading – and I was interested, I weren't just reading for the sake of it – because I wanted to know.

[Meg](#), the same age, at the same time and with the same paper:


I was encouraged to read all the headlines to do with the war, you know, the advance of the 8th army and so on. Yes, at a young age I knew more names of towns in Egypt than in this country!

The slightly older Peter read the papers with an even greater urgency as his brother, a pilot, had disappeared in the Far East, his body not found until sixty years later. Such comments suggest that it was not simply what was read (choice, was after all diminishing) but the way books and newspapers were read that was changing, both the scarcity of texts and the context of reading inspiring a greater avidity.

Conclusion

I call the book I am writing about our readers *Running Down Eyre St*, in tribute to the proselytising [Judith](#). After the war was over her mother (who favoured the neighbouring tuppenny library) led her child to the well-stocked Central Library, still surrounded by rubble. Prizing her solitary Saturday afternoons in the public library Judith decided that she should share the joy. She can remember at ten years old in 1948:

Judith in 1947



I remember running up Eyre Street with Sheila Thompson so she could join the library. They gave you a little round ticket which you kept and slotted the book's name ... and my mother played pop with me because she didn't know where we were.

Judith's quest for books is mirrored in many of our readers' stories, a journey usually solitary and often passionate. The war seems to have isolated our readers but simultaneously increased their passion for books and the value they set upon their reading.

ⁱ In fact, there was little activity in what became known as the 'Phoney War', from September 1939 to April 1940.

ⁱⁱ 1939-47 Sheffield Libraries report.

iii In addition to these, a postwar report mentioned as popular: *One Pair of Feet* (1942) by Monica Dickens, *Vera Brittain's Testament of Friendship* (1940), *Trevelyan's English Social History* (1944) and *Madame Curie* (1937) by Eve Curie.

iv The USA, the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Ireland, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland.

v They were re-opened in November 1940.

vi From unpublished dissertation.

vii 1939-47 Sheffield Libraries report: 'The English people are not easily shaken out of their habits, nor are they given to making any great show of unusual states of mind. In Sheffield, their choice of reading throughout the war did not differ to any marked extent from that of previous years.'

viii From a speech at the 1952 Library Association annual conference.