

Reading Sheffield Annual Report April 2017

Disseminating the data

During the last twelve months, our unique collection of reading memories from Sheffield in the mid twentieth century has been shared with a wide audience. This has chiefly been because of the work of Lizz Tuckerman in setting up and designing our website: readingsheffield.co.uk, Dennis Tuckerman in formatting and uploading the audio recordings of over sixty interviewees and then, during the last eighteenth months, the establishment of a regularly maintained and ever-developing website by Val Hewson.

Developing the website

Val has developed the website by writing and commissioning Reading Journeys which point website visitors to the transcriptions and audio records of our interviews. Val has also begun to elicit individual reading journeys from members of the Reading Sheffield team, our most recent being that of Sue Roe.

Val has also done a huge amount of archival research on the pioneering work of the two city librarians, **Richard Gordon and Joseph Lamb**, in reforming Sheffield Libraries from the early 1900s 'stagnation' - the word used in the official record - into the beacon of excellence celebrated in the 1957 film, *A Book in Hand* (including city-wide coverage and the establishment of the SINTO information exchange and the unique World Metals Index, in partnership with the city's industries). She has also done work on library culture in Leeds and Gateshead which enables us to start putting our readers' experiences in their national context. Mary has conducted a few interviews with Sheffield librarians which have contributed to Val's history of the Sheffield library service.

Interest in the website is increasing year on year:

- 2015 (May - Dec): 3,972 hits. Best month was October (1,322 hits), following the launch of the site)
- 2016 (full year): 7,118. Average of over 500/month constant for all months
- 2017 to end March: 1,934. Projected end of year: 7,736
- Subscribers remain disappointingly low, at 12.

- The most popular pages are Home and the blog.

Our Twitter account (@readsheffield) now has over 400 followers.

Conferences in the summer of 2016

Three conferences in 2016 enabled us to share various aspects of the Reading Sheffield project with academic audiences and to establish links with other projects.

A: June 2016 Val and Mary contributed to the Sheffield Hallam University conference 'The Auden Generation and After'. Val: **Even Edgar Wallace may be discovered...': The fiction policy of an English public library in the 1930**; Mary **Everyday Reading and the New: Sheffield literary tastes 1930-1950**.

It was a lively conference. It is always good to participate in events organized by Sheffield Hallam which has done so much to support us.

B: The annual Oral History Society conference at Roehampton University in July gave us the opportunity to reflect on three aspects of our project:

1. The ways in which the search for funding has shaped the project (Mary Grover)
2. The use of archival research to provide a context for our oral histories (Val Hewson)
3. The use of oral histories as 'poetry ore' (Eleanor Brown)

Synopses of our papers are attached. The session was very well received and strengthened links between ourselves and the Memories of Fiction oral history at London University with which Mary is involved.

B: Following this conference Val was asked to give a paper at the Femorabilia Conference at Liverpool John Moore's University in October. (Femorabilia is a collection preserving 20th century women's and girls' magazines and comics.) Val spoke on a Sheffield Libraries project: **'Quite honest...and most carefully done' – A survey of children's reading in Sheffield (1937-38)**

The Book of the Project

Preparation of material for these conferences has helped Val and Mary lay the foundations for their book about the Reading Sheffield material. Writing this is now underway and a couple of chapters are almost complete. The next task is to identify potential publishers.

Eleanor Brown's poetry

Eleanor Brown has already found a publisher for her poems in response to our recorded interviews. We are delighted that Bloodaxe Books, who published her first collection, *Maiden Speech*, have proposed a second collection of Eleanor's poems to come out in 2018. This will include her Reading Sheffield poems. We are hugely grateful to the individuals and organisations which sponsored Eleanor and delighted that Eleanor's extraordinary poems will enable our readers to reach new audiences. These poems, as Eleanor puts it are 'deeply rooted in the individuality and immediacy of those 58 unique voices.' As part of the 2016 Off the Shelf Festival Eleanor read many of these poems to listeners of every generation in a packed Carpenter Room, sending her listeners back to the voices that inspired her.

Lizz Tuckerman's visual and audio work

We are also delighted that another creative response to the Reading Sheffield voices will be shared with Sheffield audiences in the 2017 Off the Shelf Festival. Lizz Tuckerman has now completed her audio-visual response to our readers which will be installed at Bank St Arts in October. The sponsorship of the Humanities Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University will make this possible. These evocative images will be on display at the AGM 27 April 2017.

Talks to community groups

During the last twelve months Mary, Sue and Loveday have visited eight community groups sharing our readers' experiences and gathering more reading histories. These include five Towns Women's Guilds, the Victorian Society, the Inner Wheel and the Trefoil Guild. On three occasions Mary has been told that a member of the audience has spoken for the first time in the group in large part because of the physical presence of early copies of books that have been remembered by our interviewees. It has been an inspiration to

see the power of our material to reawaken memories of early reading and to enable people to recall all sorts of significant personal experience attached to reading memories. Mary will work with a group supporting dementia sufferers in the autumn.

'Reading Sheffield: Sheffield Libraries and Book Clubs 1771-1850' by Loveday Herridge and Sue Roe

Finally, the first academic publication from members of our group is projected to be published in autumn 2017. Published as part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council's project on Communities Libraries, it is entitled *Before the Public Library: Reading, Community and Identity in the Atlantic World, 1650-1850*, and contains Sue and Loveday's chapter 'Reading Sheffield: Sheffield Libraries and Book Clubs 1771-1850'. Another unexpected and wonderful turn to the project which sprung from Loveday and Sue's participation in related conferences in Liverpool and London.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would just like to say thank you to all the members of this group who make it such fun to be a part of. Every planning meeting is an inspiration and points to paths I never knew existed. But without the continued financial and practical support of Chris Hopkins from the Humanities Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University we would not have been able to take the paths that have been revealed to us.

Dr Mary Grover

5 April 2017