

# Reading Sheffield 14<sup>th</sup> April 2014

## Introduction

When Reading Sheffield was formed in 2010 we brought together twelve people to gather information about how Sheffield people formed their reading tastes in the middle of the twentieth century. We have completed that oral history project.

We are now concentrating on sharing what we have learned with the community, exploring the context of our readers' experiences and researching Sheffield reading cultures through exploring archival material about reading groups in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

## What did you read, Sheffield?

Our first project was funded by the oldest local charity in Sheffield, Sheffield Town Trust. Over the last two years we interviewed sixty two readers, now over 70 and resident in Sheffield during the 1940s and '50s, to talk about their reading histories. These audio records are of archival quality and have now been deposited with Sheffield Archives. They will also be deposited with Sheffield Hallam University where we hope they will stimulate research.

The key aims of the project were to get a sense of how the reading habit was formed, what was read and to identify the main source of reading material.

## Outcomes of What did you read, Sheffield?

- A. 62 interviews: 58 of these have audio records and four have interviewers' summaries.
- B. **Transcriptions:** The majority of the interviews have been transcribed thanks to the efforts of volunteers from the project and team members. Sheffield Hallam funded nine transcriptions for which we are very grateful as it is a lengthy task.
- C. Annual celebratory events for our interviewees which have created a sense of community amongst them and a sense that the histories they have share with us are valued. At the heart of the first was a showing of the memorable film about Sheffield Libraries 'A Book in Hand' (1957). A film of the first celebratory event made by award winning documentary film maker, Mikey Watts, funded by SHU who are making a copy for each interviewee. At the second event interviewees brought photographs of themselves from the 1940s or '50s. The interviewees and their photographs were photographed by a professional photographer, Tom Stayte. Erica Brown from Sheffield Hallam interviewed Rony Robinson. All participants enjoyed the occasion hugely. Members of the public were invited to this event.
- D. Dissemination of these reading histories in talks to local groups about the findings of the project, an article in the Yorkshire Post to commemorate National Libraries Day 2012 and the paper to the MSA conference 2013, attached.
- E. **Two papers at academic conferences:** one at the international Modernist Studies Association August 2013 and one forthcoming in May 2014 at the Sheffield Hallam

Conference connected to the Reading and Literary Cultures Collection. Both these papers are about the freedom of our readers from a sense of being judged culturally.

- F. Dramatic monologues inspired by the audio recordings of our readers are being written by Eleanor Brown, the Bloodaxe poet (Maiden Speech 1992). Funding sources are being sought to pay Eleanor. Our bid for this to the Arts Council failed. Bloodaxe will consider publication.
- G. The Reading Sheffield Blog created by two volunteer undergraduates on work placement with Reading Sheffield at <http://readingsheffield.wordpress.com/>. This is still in its infancy.
- H. **Bid to the Arts Council** for an artwork in the Central Library about our project. Sadly we did not get money to do this. We are very grateful to the artist, Lizz Tuckerman and to Loveday Herridge who spent a great deal of time preparing this bid. The failure of two bids to the Arts Council suggests that it is not worth our applying to them in the future. We are very grateful for the help and encouragement of Andrew Milroy in his last few months as Head of the Library service, to Cheryl Bailey from Sheffield Archives for her advice and to Kim Streets of Sheffield Museums.

#### Intergenerational reading histories

One of our undergraduate volunteers conducted a pilot project on intergenerational reading histories. She explored how the reading of three of Reading Sheffield members affected the rest of their family. All three interviews were transcribed and the records lodged with Reading Sheffield.

#### Community workshops in schools 2014

In March 2014 we won funding from the Sheffield Town Trust, to foster imaginative responses to reading in Sheffield primary schools. Jean Compton, a community artist, will help children create two dimensional aerial sculptures celebrating favourite moments from favourite books. These sculptures will decorate local libraries and schools. We are liaising with Netherthorpe School who want to host this project.

Ray Hearne, local poet and folk singer will encourage a group of children to write a poem about their favourite book. From these poems he will write a ballad to be sung at the Reading Sheffield annual celebratory event, October, 2014. The children's poems will be posted on our blog, Reading Sheffield. We have not yet started to recruit a school for Ray's project.

#### Reading Sheffield Research Group

Two members of the Reading Sheffield team Sue Roe and Loveday Herridge are now conducting extensive archival research on early book societies, clubs and libraries in eighteenth and nineteenth century Sheffield. They will be giving their paper on these literary cultures at an AHRC Research Network event, Libraries in the Community, to be held in London on 23-24 January 2015, the third colloquium in a series entitled 'Community libraries: connecting readers in the Atlantic world, 1650-1850'. Their expenses will be funded by AHRC.

## Red Hat

2013-4 the Sheffield retired librarians association, Red Hat, has been collecting memories of working in Sheffield Libraries in the 1950s onwards. They have organised their own groups and lodged summaries of their memories with Reading Sheffield.

## Conclusions

The oral history project has collected material of great interest and we have had some success in disseminating what we have found. Curiously, the community projects won funding but the major artwork to which these projects were to be attached, didn't. The school workshops do not, therefore, have the link with our oral history project which they would have done had they been celebrated in the same space as the artwork.

In the next few months we plan to finish transcribing the last remaining eight interviews, to check all transcriptions and to lodge all transcriptions with the audio records.

Mary would welcome advice on how to establish and run the blog which looks attractive but is not regularly updated.

The artist, Lizz Tuckerman, wishes to continue gathering images of our interviewees and their books. Mary and Lizz will gradually do this. This activity will enable us to maintain links with our interviewees.

In the last year Ros Witten, Sue Roe, Loveday Herridge and Mary Grover have met regularly to monitor bids and plan further research. We would welcome anyone who wished to join us. We are always struck by the interest members of the community have in our project. Thank you all for your support.

Mary Grover

Chair of Reading Sheffield

13 April 2014