

Steel City Readers: Reading for Pleasure in Sheffield, 1925-1955, by Mary Grover

Professor Dame Karin Barber CBE, FBA very kindly spoke at the launch of Steel City Readers in place of the writer and researcher Alison Light who was unable to attend through illness. Karin Barber is Emeritus Professor of African Cultural Anthropology at the University of Birmingham and Visiting Professor of Anthropology at the London School of Economics. Her interests include texts, oral performance, popular culture and religion in Yorubaland, Nigeria.

So very sorry that Alison Light can't be here. I can't possibly hope to substitute for her. But I'm delighted to have the chance to say a few words about the Reading Sheffield project and the volume we're launching today, *Steel City Readers*, the progress of which I've been following with tremendous interest since Mary first told me about it.

When she sent me the draft manuscript of the book I was totally gripped by it. It transported me into mid-twentieth century Sheffield – not just into the place, distinctive as it is, and the time, before and after the Second World War, but also – most importantly – the people: the 65 participants in the project talking about their memories of books and reading, their enjoyment of all kinds of literature, their practical strategies for getting hold of books to read.

The Reading Sheffield project is a model of collaborative research. Oral history interviewing can sometimes seem like a process of extraction – the researcher goes with a list of things they want to find out and they ask questions that push the interviewee into supplying the right answers. Reading Sheffield was the opposite of that. The open-ended, responsive and creative conversations that the participants engaged in allowed all kinds of vivid observations and unexpected insights to come out. It's a delight to read what the Sheffield readers had to say. And it's a beauty of the book that the actual words of the interviewees are given so much space – we hear their voices loud and clear, they keep coming back in different chapters until we feel we know them – unlike in some oral history studies where the author takes over and speaks *for*

the interviewees instead of providing space in which they can speak for themselves.

This is a highly original and valuable contribution to social history. The book is structured as stages in a composite person's reading life – from early childhood through schooldays to young adulthood and then adult life – interwoven with sections of social history background. This makes a coherent narrative without suppressing any individual story. It's also a history of how books themselves became available in different ways: through the Sheffield Municipal Library; the Boots Library and the commercial tuppenny libraries; there's a description of the actual library buildings, their locations and lending arrangements, and the differences between local and central libraries; school libraries; magazines and newspapers, and the encyclopaedias and the bound sets of Dickens ...

I was struck by the number of readers in the project who spoke of their craving for printed reading matter, or of their hunger for books or of an inner compulsion to read. They don't describe it as a desire for useful information or for entertainment, moral self-improvement, let alone cultural uplift – they just say they had to read, they wanted books. Many people of all backgrounds have shared that craving – as a child I had it from the moment I learnt to read. In Nigeria, when I was doing research there, I remember a teenage girl in the house where I lived picking up a novel in Yoruba from my bookshelf and getting so gripped that she just planted herself in the spot where she happened to be – sitting on my table – and read it to the end. I went out, and hours later when I came back she was still there, by now lying flat on the table, still absolutely transfixed. And it makes no difference whether the reading matter is high literature or pulp fiction, as long as it's readable. So *Steel City Readers*, while presenting a distinctive, local history of reading and readers, also shows what many of us have in common: readers are readers no matter where they come from. This yen for reading is routinely ignored or disparaged by what you might call highbrow critics and commentators. But reading is a process of exploration and discovery that the Steel City readers describe – with great vividness – as a kind of freedom and a kind of wealth.

Oral history, done like this, reaches parts of the past that no other research can. It preserves and re-activates historical memories that would otherwise be lost – but which illuminate big themes of social change, class, cultural history, with unique vividness. The Reading Sheffield project – and the book that came

out of it – are pioneers. It's to be hoped that they will have started a movement and that more projects as exciting as this one will follow.