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Reading and the First World War: Readers, Texts, Archives

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

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Review of *Reading and the First World War: Readers, Texts, Archives*, edited by Shafquat Towheed and Edmund G. C. King. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 266 pp. ISBN 978-1-137-30270-0.

As Shafquat Towheed and Edmund G. C. King rightly state in their introduction to *Reading and the First World War: Readers, Texts, Archives*, inquiries into the practice of reading and into the cultural, social and literary history of First World War form a particularly productive partnership when combined. This edited collection is excellent proof of the validity of their approach. At first sight it seems extraordinary, given the much-noted literary nature of the First World War, that the act of reading should have been eclipsed almost entirely by the act of writing in research to date. Perhaps this is not entirely surprising, though: the vast number of written sources produced by combatants of (mostly Western) participating nations have facilitated research into writing in wartime, whereas records of reading practices are far more elusive. Scholars interested in reading practices may turn to autobiographical sources such as letters or diaries, to literary sources, and to the records of publishers, librarians or relief organizations distributing reading materials, many of which have become more readily available to researchers thanks to growing digitization initiatives, from commercial databases to crowd-sourced, freely accessible repositories such as Europeana. However, comments on reading experiences, habits, or preferences contained in these sources are by necessity almost always limited, coincidental, speculative or incomplete.

The strength of this collection is its range of approaches and focal points. Contributions range from case studies of individual readers and readership groups (established writers and artists as well as lesser-known soldiers, prisoners of war or conscientious objectors, and indeed civilians) to those scrutinizing particular kinds of reading matter and its providers (such as romance novels, soldier newspapers, libraries or publishing houses). The twelve contributors further employ a range of different methodologies for tracing the frequently elusive practice of reading, from in-depth scrutiny of individual reading records (Towheed on Edith Wharton and Jim Cleary on Australian barrister William A. Amiet) and literary engagement with the act of reading (Max Saunders on Ford Madox Ford), to work with the records of publishers (Jane Potter), libraries (Sara Mori) and relief organizations (Jonathan Arnold

and King). While all chapters focus on Western combatant nations (Australia, Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and the United States), this bias is to a great extent caused by the fact that these nations at the time had the highest literacy rates, and consequently produced more records of reading than, for instance, the Ottoman Empire or India. The introduction perhaps initially generalizes a little too much on the literacy and literariness of different combatant nations, and overemphasizes the universal importance of the printed or hand-written word to the exclusion of other forms of "reading" war experience, from ongoing oral traditions such as jokes or songs, to visual media. However, this is an excusable overstatement given the relative neglect of reading in scholarship to date, and the rich and fascinating array of essays on engagement with the written word gathered in this volume.

The volume offers a wealth of reminders that it was not only the content of reading matter that held significance to wartime readers, but often the physical nature of texts as well. Books, letters, and newspapers are firmly placed in relation to the material culture of the war by a number of authors included in the volume: from the fashion for patriotic gift books that were treated as prestigious objects rather than necessarily read (Towheed and King), to the desire for cheap portable editions (Alisa Miller), and the deteriorating quality of the paper on which German soldier newspapers were published (Robert L. Nelson). In their introduction, Towheed and King also note the double-edged nature of Bibles or prayer books distributed to soldiers, which acted as both talisman and reading matter (p. 13), and they emphasize a fascinating split between books as physical objects offering solace or diversion, and books present in memory only, remembered while absent and used as a reference point in letters or diaries (p. 14).

A recurring theme throughout the volume are reading tastes and their relationship to the experience of war. Three key points emerge from the array of case studies in the collection. Firstly, reading in wartime acquired if anything a heightened importance for a wide variety of reasons: escapism, self-improvement, patriotic or pacifist zeal. Secondly, reading became highly politicized in the hands of moral and religious agencies as well as in the hands of governments intent on shaping the minds and attitudes of their own citizens, whether civilian or combatant, and indeed those of enemy civilians, as Emmanuel Debruyne notes in his chapter on reading in occupied Belgium and France. And finally, despite official claims on the part of mainstream newspapers, relief organizations and certain individuals, reading tastes and habits remained staunchly individual. As Jonathan Arnold outlines in his chapter on American soldiers - drawing on a book by Edward Frank Allen, commissioned to describe America's young citizen army in 1918 - the diversity among First World War soldiers in terms of class, educational background, spiritual and political allegiances in any given combatant nation makes generalizations as to reading tastes and habits virtually impossible. The same can, of course, be argued with regard to civilian readers, as chapters by Potter, Miller, Mori and

Catherine Feely show. If there is one fundamental insight to be gleaned from this diverse and fascinating array of essays, it is that reading habits may have been intensified by war, but were not necessarily changed.

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