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Martyn Lyons, *Readers and Society in Nineteenth-Century France: Workers, Women, Peasants*. New York: Palgrave, 2001. xii + 208 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$60.00 US. ISBN 0-333-92126-7.

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The new history of the book is no longer new. It is now an established field, with a scholarly literature concerning its own issues, methodologies, and primary sources. The pioneers in French history--Henri-Jean Martin, Robert Darnton, and Roger Chartier, for example--have been joined by enough scholars in other national histories to justify a professional association--the Society for the History of Authors, Readers, and Publishers (SHARP)--with a website, a newsletter, a journal, and annual meetings. Besides notices on articles and monographs, one sees widely circulated news of research seminars, scholarly panels, and study groups, such as those Jean-Yves Mollier has hosted at the Université de Versailles-Saint Quentin-en-Yvelines. So it is not surprising to see status reports of work in the field as well as original contributions to it, often both in the same volume, such as Martyn Lyons's latest book, *Readers and Society in Nineteenth-Century France*.

Lyons is an established scholar in modern French history. After writing three well-received monographs on revolutionary and Napoleonic France, he has turned to books, their producers and consumers in nineteenth-century France (besides the oral history of readers closer to home in Australia). In this field, Lyons is best known for *Le Triomphe du livre*--an important study which traces the development of a nation-wide literate culture during the era of "the rage to read," when relatively few other media besides print competed for consumer attention.[1] More recently, Lyons has contributed to journals and collections on related topics. One such effort was his essay "New Readers in the Nineteenth Century" in Roger Chartier and Guglielmo Cavallo's magisterial collection, *Storia della Lettura nel mondo occidentale*. [2] It is the research for this contribution that Lyons's latest book is based upon in part.

Here Lyons is interested primarily in the democratization of reading and its historical implications for three groups in particular: workers, women, and peasants (the latter group in lieu of children, whom Lyons had included in his original essay). His book comes in three unequal parts. A brief survey of the historical changes in literate activities in nineteenth-century France precedes two chapters on each group of new readers: first on efforts to control them and then on their resistance to those efforts. This "antiphonal" treatment is resolved in a short conclusion that argues for the importance of reading to social history. Each feature of Lyons's book deserves attention.

The survey chapter provides a useful overview of previous work on the changing context of reading. Topics include growing literacy; increasing production and distribution of printed matter; development of a mass, homogeneous, national literate culture; new public and private institutions to inform the reading public--schools and libraries, most notably--and the fearful commentary on the new readers' activities. In this discussion Lyons lays out his principal themes--elite control and popular resistance -- which he develops for the rest of the book.

Little is new in this chapter, including Lyons's skepticism about the role played by formal education. "Perhaps it is too superficial to deduce the existence of the new readers of the nineteenth century from enrolment figures calculated in different ways by the schools themselves," Lyons writes. "Enrolment figures are not necessarily a reliable guide to school attendance" (pp. 6-7). For families struggling to make ends meet, schooling for their children was a luxury they could ill-afford. Consequently, Lyons does not accept Raymond Grew and Patrick Harrigan's data that suggest elementary education's much earlier and substantive impact.^[3] And yet Lyons does accept comparable quantitative data provided by François Furet and Jacques Ozouf on the extra-institutional sources of literacy in the same period.^[4] "Informal channels" in these literate cultures apparently sufficed (p. 9). The fact of the matter is, whatever their source, readers there were. Of much greater interest to Lyons is the deeply ambivalent response to this phenomenon, and this response he studies in the second and longest portion of his book.

On the one hand, there is the critical, contemporary commentary on the new readers. Conservative officials in the Roman Catholic Church, traditional defenders of French state authority, and patriarchal, property-owning social elites all wrote about the dangers of a rapidly expanding, literate population. Observers decried this phenomenon everywhere--in the cities, in the countryside, and in the household--especially in the wake of social and political unrest. As Lyons states in the conclusion, his book could have taken its title from Louis Chevalier's *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses* (1958)--"reading classes and dangerous classes" (p. 156)--so widespread was the concern with unregulated reading.

Even sympathetic observers were alarmed. In *Le Peuple* (1846), Jules Michelet worried about literate workers losing their class identity; in *Indiana* (1832), George Sand mused about young women taking novels too seriously; and in *Le Cheval d'orgueil* (1975), Pierre-Jakez Hélias noted the assimilation to French culture among his Breton-speaking peasant ancestors. For more conservative writers, such as the notorious Monseigneur Dupanloup at mid-century, the dangers included godlessness, immorality, family dissolution, social disorder, and political revolution. This portion of Lyons's work, of course, is very familiar. Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) is a satirical monument to unwise reading. Lyons, however, takes his scholarly cue from Jean Hébrard and Anne-Marie Chartier, who have developed the same theme at length.^[5]

On the other hand, there is the equally pervasive discussion of reading by readers themselves. Diaries, correspondence, and autobiographies written by exceptional workers, women, and peasants provide the best first-hand evidence historians have about reading practices. Lyons makes good use of these sources. Each chapter on hostile commentary about newly literate groups is followed by the voices of actual readers. The contrast is delightful.

Lyons argues for a large "culture of resistance" on the part of literate workers, such as Martin Nadaud and Agricol Perdiguier, who wrote of the obstacles they overcame in order to read and then of the political uses they put this newly acquired skill. Similarly, Lyons discusses the way Eugénie de Guérin, Hélène Legros, and Louise Weiss--extraordinary writers as well as readers--managed to subvert the latent *bovarysme* in most French popular literature for women. Borrowing insights from Jane Radway and Michel de Certeau, Lyons writes, "The reader re-works and re-imagines what she reads to produce meanings and associations which cannot be predicted in the text itself or in advice literature" (p. 101). Representative voices of peasants are harder to find, but the trend among them is also apparent; it just took the likes of Emile Guillaumin and Antoine Sylvère more time to create the social networks necessary for "independent peasant uses of written culture" (p. 151). The response was the same: each group of new readers elaborated for itself a contestatory culture of its own.

Finally, in his brief concluding chapter, Lyons qualifies, summarizes, and suggests the importance of his work. He does so by re-asserting the agency of these newly literate groups. "The history of reading practices connects with the broad history of class relations in the period, as the dominant classes attempted to neutralize social conflict, through reading advice and the creation of appropriate cultural

institutions.... Reading models proposed for women by male novelists, Catholics, and feminists suggest some of the ways in which gender difference were constructed” (p. 157). These cultural-cum-social confrontations occurred when literate activities constituted a central feature of everyday life as well as of social control. The resistance of the new readers, using texts for their own purposes, contributed significantly to the social tensions inherent to the rise of republican politics, a more mobile society, and an industrializing economy. The new readers increasingly shared in these historical changes with contributions of their own: “for all of them, reading could bring a greater awareness of the possibilities for liberation” (p. 161).

Lyons’s work is a model of its kind. As was true of his earlier books, this study is well grounded in the most appropriate sources and its judgments are well-informed and well-reasoned. But Lyons’s work also wrestles with problems all too familiar in the social history of ideas, particularly the intractable nature of indirect evidence. Far more is known about readers than about their reading; far more is documented about the titles they read than about the mental act of engaging those texts. Readers’ intellectual world eludes most historians’ efforts, however important these changes in mentality are to an understanding of human motivation. To plumb the inner selves of readers in the past, social historians must use the tools and methodologies long used by intellectual historians: authentication of archival materials, close reading of texts, discourse analysis of multiple voices, and yes, even the application of literary theory where appropriate.[6]

Moreover, nearly all the sources about readers are exceptional, even the most direct. Diarists, autobiographers, and commentators are writers and therefore very unusual individuals. Their experience with reading, mediated and distorted by writing, is not necessarily typical of the social groups they are supposed to represent. It is no accident that nearly all of Lyons’s sources are more bourgeois than they are working class. Similarly, the sources are curiously selective: despite their growing numbers, literate children are not studied. They always seem to be left for historians of education. Obviously, school children cannot easily speak for themselves, but there are some remarkable student notebooks in private archives worth closer study, despite blatant efforts at social control in most educational practice.

Nor are deeply religious women discussed much here or elsewhere. Spiritual autobiographies and confessional diaries were widely circulated and read in the nineteenth century. Among the letters of Marie-Sophie Leroyer de Chantepie (1800-1888) to George Sand and Gustave Flaubert, or in the diaries of Geneviève Bréton-Vaudoyer (1849-1918), for example, one sees extensive responses to religious literature, such as Bonnie Smith has examined.[7] Notwithstanding Philippe Lejeune’s study of women’s diaries,[8] the social history of the book continues to elide this pervasive literate experience in nineteenth-century France.

These conceptual and source problems pertain to the field, not just to Lyons’s latest contribution to it. In fact, Lyons attempts to address them forthrightly in this book. For example, the quantitative analysis of publishing records in *Le Triomphe du livre* has given way to the sensitive reading of texts.[9] Lyons makes clear the limits of his sources, such as autobiographies, to distinguish between reading and reading practices. He has chosen wisely to focus his attention on manageable issues, leaving the intractable problem of newspaper reading, for instance, for others to study. And he has carefully explored the richest possibilities of the field as it is currently practiced. For this very reason, as a successful hybrid of intellectual and social history, Lyons’s *Readers and Society in Nineteenth-Century France* is a valuable contribution, and it deserves a wide audience of French historians.

[1] Martyn Lyons, *Le Triomphe du livre: Une histoire sociologique de la lecture dans la France du 19e siècle* (Paris: Promodis, 1987).

[2] Roger Chartier and Guiglielmo Cavallo, *Storia della Lettura nel mondo occidentale* (Rome: Giuseppe Laterza & Figli Spa, 1995); and in English translation, *A History of Reading in the West*, ed. Roger Chartier and Guiglielmo Cavallo, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999).

[3] Raymond Grew and Patrick Harrigan, *School, State, and Society: The Growth of Elementary Schooling in 19th-Century France: A Quantitative Analysis* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1991).

[4] François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, *Lire et écrire: L'Alphabétisation des français de Calvin à Jules Ferry* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977).

[5] Jean Hébrard and Anne-Marie Chartier, *Discours sur la lecture, 1880-1980* (Paris: BPI--Centre Georges Pompidou, 1989).

[6] Lyons generally makes very good use of the theories propounded by Jane Radway and Michel de Certeau, as noted earlier, but also of Pierre Bourdieu, especially his notions of cultural capital and *habitus*. But I must take issue with Lyons's use of Stanley Fish's "communities of interpretation." This literary theorist and critic focused primarily on professionally trained readers, hardly comparable to loosely associated social groups such as workers, women, and peasants who created Lyons's "cultures of resistance" (pp. 61, 95, 160-61).

[7] Bonnie Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoises of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[8] Philippe Lejeune, *Le Moi des demoiselles: Enquête sur le journal de jeune fille* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1993).

[9] Lyons, *Le Triomphe du livre*, esp. pp. 77-104.

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