

Martyn Lyons, *A History of Reading and Writing in the Western World*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 267 pp. ISBN: 978 0 230 00162 6. A\$44.00.

*Reviewed by Patrick Buckridge*

Like the Tardis, Martyn Lyons's latest book is much bigger inside than out. Unlike some recent door-stoppers in the field, this is a moderately-sized paperback. It has a magnificent Cézanne portrait of a professional reader (an art critic) glowering balefully from the front cover—or perhaps just lost in the thoughts provoked by the three open books on his desk and the shelves of well-used books at his back. The ambivalence of the image nicely evokes the mystery and complexity of the actively reading mind, a phenomenon of recurrent interest throughout the book.

Inside the covers, however, the book expands mightily to fill the space promised by its wide-ranging and ambitious title. Remarkably, Lyons has managed to fit a history of reading and writing in the West into a mere 200 pages of text (plus references) with no pronounced sense of strain or compression. Indeed, though very systematically organized within each chapter, the text is liberally sprinkled throughout with illustrations and anecdotes which, if they do not produce an exactly leisurely read, certainly relieve the cognitive effort demanded by a necessarily dense narrative, while bringing complex historical arguments to life.

Few if any other contemporary historians, I believe, could have brought to this project the knowledge and authority required to undertake it as a monograph, with all the attendant advantages of a single perspective and a coherently developing thesis. Lyons is a distinguished student of French history and book history: he has been publishing prolifically in that area for over thirty years. And that non-Anglo background not only provides him with his own storehouse of primary material with which to enrich the secondary syntheses that rightly form the bulk of the book; it also positions him so as to defamiliarise very usefully many of the standard debates that have been central to British and American book history in recent decades. This, together with his deep knowledge of European book history

scholarship, much of it untranslated, and his established reputation in British and Australian book history, makes him the ideal author of a book such as this, able to illuminate the text with examples from all over the Western world—from France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Russia, the Americas and Australasia.

The book provides a framing narrative of developments in reading and writing from the ancient and medieval worlds through Renaissance and Reformation, Enlightenment and revolutionary upheaval, to the mass literacy of the late nineteenth century and the popular and digital reading cultures of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. What adds to the book's value as a survey is that it shapes its narrative not just in terms of innovations or turning-points (the codex, silent reading, printing, linotype, cheap paper, extensive reading), but also in terms of the social contexts and the religious, legal, commercial, industrial, educational and political factors that made such advances possible (or delayed them), and of the ongoing debates around their interpretation. Lyons is the most vigilantly critical of cultural historians: rare indeed is the unexamined premise, hidden bias, or lazy assumption that can evade his dialectical eye. For this reason the book feels at times less like an unfolding narrative than a series of orienteering dashes from one nexus of disputed causes and effects to another. In dealing with most of the major controversial theses in book history—the measurement of literacy rates, the (so-called) “print revolution,” Protestantism and the book, censorship, the “reading revolution” of the eighteenth century, and the relative importance of copyright law, industrialization, new technology, political emancipation and public education in producing the mass reading culture of the late nineteenth century—the thoroughness, clarity and balance of his treatment are exemplary.

There is nonetheless a strong sense throughout the book that certain perspectives, namely those that seem to involve “active” or “resistant” reading, will always command more respect than their opposites. There is a kind of sans-culottisme in Lyons's repeated insistence on the irrepressible transgressiveness of the reader: quoting that doyen of rebellious reading, Michel de Certeau, for whom the reader is a trespassing poacher rather than a forelock-tugging tenant of the literary estate, he asserts that “the principle of the reader's autonomy is fundamental to the history of reading.” This is a big call. What is certainly true is that the premise of active readership has generated richly persuasive understandings of particular reading cultures and subcultures. But I remain to be convinced that (pace the Miller of Friuli, et al.) large numbers of readers in every age did not read more or less as they were taught and trained to do by the dominant culture—whether by the school, the family, the church or some other institution—and that these people are not as much a part of the history of reading as rebellious, resistant, or simply less educated readers.

Where there is evidence, as for example in the case of women and working class readers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Chapter 11), that

individual practices of reading against or across the grain have resolved themselves into alternative or oppositional reading cultures, that is obviously a phenomenon of great interest and importance. The same can be said of the several instances in which older practices of reading and writing persist, or reinvent themselves, in tandem with new practices and new technologies: the survival of scribal culture during and long after the advent of printing is one classic instance; the various types of “intensive reading” practised long after the supposed shift to “extensive reading” are another. (On the latter instance, though, I disagree with Lyons’s contention that the raptures of emotional identification recorded by the first readers of Richardson, Rousseau and Goethe constitute a new form of intensive reading, further diluting Engelsing’s argument for a decisive shift to extensive reading in the eighteenth century (Chapter 9). This view seems to me to rest on a dubious conflation of “intensive” with “intense”: intense reading of this kind might almost be said to depend on precisely the bypassing of the linguistic signifier that characterizes extensive reading.)

Lyons’s tendency to privilege informal networks and grass-roots political formations leads him to argue, for example, that “the provision of more formal schooling for girls ... followed, rather than preceded, the feminization of the reading public. Expanding opportunities for female employment (as teachers, shop assistants, or postal clerks) and changing expectations of women did more to raise the level of female literacy.” Women, he assures us, “were not passive readers, ready to be shaped and disciplined”(154). Similarly the new public lending libraries of the mid-nineteenth century met with “considerable reader resistance” from workers, and Lyons is able to cite examples of French workers setting up their own “popular” or “democratic” libraries (167). It is not always clear, however, that alternatives to the “official” provisions existed. In his discussion of the early Soviet literacy campaign, Lyons notes that:

Many peasants failed to understand the books and newspapers they were encouraged to read, but found them good for rolling cigarettes or other more intimate uses. Once again, readers stubbornly refused to be moulded by literature prescribed by the intelligentsia. By 1939, however, the literacy rate had increased to 95 per cent for men and 79 per cent for women (189).

In this instance, I find it difficult to share Lyons’s apparent satisfaction at the peasants’ robust refusal to learn to read (perhaps I should have been a commissar!), or to regret that eventually so many of them did discover better uses for print. He has a reflex lack of sympathy with schemes of improvement and enlightenment from above; yet sometimes these do work, and frequently they are the only scheme on offer. Like Kate Flint, Lyons is immune to the charismatic appeal of Lucy Soulsby, the crusty headmistress of an Oxford girls’ school—he calls her “charmless” of all things!—who advised her young matriculants in 1902 to “read

doggedly... Make any plan of stiff reading you like, and stick to it for one year" (160), warning them that "You may very likely find my books dull. If so, do not be rash in expressing your feelings." Bracing stuff!

There are many things to commend about this book: its historical and geographical comprehensiveness, the clarity of its argumentation and exposition, the intrinsic interest of its abundant examples, and—not least—the wonderfully detailed descriptions of the machines, materials and techniques of book culture through the ages. I have just two reservations about it. The first I have touched on above: the essential populism of the account it gives of the history of reading.

The second reservation has to do with whether writing should ever have figured as a part of the project. The book with which it invites comparison, Cavallo and Chartier's much longer *History of Reading in the West* (1999), a multi-authored volume of essays to which Lyons was a major contributor, chose not to include writing in its brief. The present monograph, however, is written "in the conviction that we should no longer separate the historical study of reading from that of writing, but should explore them together and investigate the connections between them" (2). There is an obvious sense in which writing as a physical process must be a part of at least the pre-print phase of the history of reading, if only as the object of reading; but the fact that as late as the 19th century, as the book demonstrates, people were still learning to read without learning to write, makes even that connection socially tenuous. It is even less clear that the history of writing as an imaginative and intellectual process is at all closely intertwined with the history of reading, and in any case Lyons has made no real attempt to chart the history of writing in this sense, except in the second last chapter, "The Democratization of Writing," in which he deals with what he calls a "parallel transformation" to the expansion of the reading public in the nineteenth century, namely the spread of writing in a range of non-literary forms, none of which seem to have anything to do with reading as such. The connection seems to be "democratisation," but many other things (the franchise, museums) were also democratized in the nineteenth century, with similarly adventitious relations to the history of reading.

These are no doubt issues for ongoing debate, and it is a tribute to the vigour and clarity of Lyons' writing that they arise at all. For apart from being an enormously useful and accessible source of reliable information and an incomparably comprehensive conspectus on the state of the sub-discipline, the book also presents a stimulating and coherent thesis with which scholars will surely feel the need to engage for years to come.