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**Published**

2009

**Book Title**

Resourceful Reading: The New Empiricism, eResearch, and Australian Literary Culture

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## **An Australian Reading Experience Database, 1788 –**

Patrick Buckridge

The proposal to begin to develop an Australian Reading Experience database has the potential to unite the benefits of large-scale historical synthesis with those of intensive qualitative analysis of the act of reading.<sup>1</sup> What follows is an account of the present state of the project, together with some consideration of the questions of design and definition that have already come to light.

The British ‘Reading Experience Database 1450-1945’ (henceforth ‘RED’) was launched in 2006. Its salient features are that it is a fully searchable database, with open Internet access, containing written records of specific reading experiences that have occurred in Britain from 1450 to 1945. At present it contains over 21,600 such records; the short-term aim is to have 25,000 by the middle of 2009; and the long-term objective is for the database to keep growing forever, funds permitting. It is an open-ended project. As records of reading experiences are discovered, they are submitted to the RED where they are verified and edited by RED staff, and finally released to the public database, which has both Basic and Advanced search functions.<sup>2</sup>

Early in the gestation of the RED a decision was taken to restrict the readers to persons of British nationality, wherever in the world their reading experience occurred, and to persons of any nationality whose reading occurred in the United Kingdom. Residents of former British colonies were not included unless they were born in Britain.<sup>3</sup> Hence, if Australia wants a similar database for Australian reading experiences it will need to build its own. The Centre for Public Culture and Ideas at Griffith University, in collaboration with the Public Memory Research Centre at the University of Southern Queensland, are jointly providing internal start-up funds to produce a

prototype for an Australian Reading Experience Database (henceforth ‘AusRED’), beginning in 2009.

It goes without saying that in order to realize its potential the AusRED will need to be interoperable not just with the British RED but with other national REDs if and when they come into existence. To that end, arrangements are in place to involve RED staff as technical and content consultants during the process of building the prototype. Plans are also afoot for including New Zealand in the next phase of the AusRED’s development, and further down the track links will be actively forged with whatever other countries establish comparable databases. (Germany and Canada are rumoured to be moving in a RED-ward direction.)

That is the larger vision, and whatever its shortcomings and naïvetés it is genuinely global in scope. One looks forward to the day – still some way off – when a scholar in Brisbane can find out what people in Sydney, Hamburg, Toronto and Tokyo had to say about the novels of Dostoevsky in the 1930s. Meanwhile, back on *terra firma*, what will the AusRED prototype look like? And in particular, how might it differ from its British parent?

Generally speaking, the intention is to stick pretty closely to the British format – the linked relationship dictates that in any case – but there is one inescapable difference between the British and Australian contexts, and that is the almost 350 years between 1450 and 1788 (realistically the earliest possible start date for an AusRED). That chronological difference has two consequences relevant to the final shape of an AusRED. The first is the pressure it exerts to bring the terminal year covered by the database much closer to the present than 1945 (the terminal year of the British RED). If you only have 220 years of reading history, you can’t really afford to pass up 75 of them! And that internal pressure is reinforced by nearly every external

institution with a potential interest in supporting the development of an AusRED: publishers, booksellers, large libraries and various state and federal government departments and semi-government agencies – for all of which, the notional payoff is access to information about recent reading habits on which to base projections about emerging tastes and niche markets, which in turn might influence commissionings, author-profiling, print runs, etc. – or in the case of non-profit public bodies, access to data relevant to achieving more efficiently targeted resourcing of schools and public libraries, or a more equitable allocation of arts project funds. In this sense – to put the case slightly cynically – the AusRED would be doing free client-survey work for organizations that they would otherwise have to pay for themselves.

Indeed, some potential clients or sponsors would plump for no fixed terminal date at all, but rather a continuous updating – in effect a constant monitoring – of the reading experience of the Australian community. If such a service were financially or technologically feasible, one can readily understand its appeal to an ‘industry partner’; but it would not be without interest to reading-historians either. It would be interesting, for example, to track the effects on Australian reading habits of changes in government policy such as the proposed lifting of the ban on parallel book imports.

Clearly an open-ended RED would entail a very different data-collection methodology from that used for earlier periods, at least for the years since the explosion of online discussion groups and blogs in the mid 1990s. The astronomical increase in the sheer quantity of reading-experience data in those locations raises the question of whether a RED could afford to devote resources to reading, selecting and transferring large quantities of information between websites? Machine-searching, or ‘harvesting’ of blogs and databases like ADB Online is a possibility, but in the end

it might make more sense to declare the last ten or fifteen years a kind of borderless information zone, to which the RED would supply map references in the form of annotated links to the main sites on which Australian readers will have recorded their own reading experiences. Indeed the AusRED could even enter the zone with **its** own modest blog – just one among many – inviting Australians to record (and thereby submit) their reading experiences directly then and there. The ‘mapped zone’ concept would presumably also avoid copyright problems, since no actual reproduction of texts would be involved. Whether such a ‘zone’ could share a platform with an edited AusRED is uncertain at this stage.

Not all the challenges occur at the recent end of the proposed database. A question that has to be addressed, at whatever point on the historical time-line, is: ‘What do we mean by an Australian Reading Experience?’ The British RED has adopted the following definition of a ‘reading experience’:

‘A recorded engagement with a written or printed text – beyond the mere fact of possession’<sup>4</sup>

This definition, it seems to me, conforms to common sense; meets the likely expectations of the typical searcher; and can be easily understood by the volunteers who will no doubt do much of the work of populating the database in the longer term. The definition of a reading experience, however, like the terminal date, is a point at which stakeholder-pressure might well be applied; but I would be reluctant to move away from the base notion of a transaction with a written or printed text. Expand that to include the reading of faces, films, landscapes, paintings and social situations and I fear the whole project becomes unworkable: it will have become the ‘Australian Life Experience Database’; and we will have lost the possibility of documenting, exhaustively, the continuing history of a distinct and determinate cultural practice. The British formulation of

the larger phenomenon being recorded, with a different national adjective, will serve the project well: ‘What British [sc. Australian] people read, where and when they read it and what they thought of it.’<sup>5</sup>

Further definitional problems will arise, of course, with ‘Australian’. Picture a young English backpacker spending a gap-year in Australia, travelling around the country, reading a series of fantasy paperbacks in bed at night. He writes letters home, in one of which he describes his reading to a parent or a kindred spirit. Does his description constitute an Australian reading experience? It is certainly a British one, but it would not be captured by the British RED with its terminal date of 1945; so it would be the AusRED or nowhere for this young man’s reading experience – and it does seem a pity to exclude it, and to ignore the salience of the environment in which he had it.

A somewhat different question arises at the other end of the time-line, in relation to the great number of British and other immigrants and transportees to the early colony whose reading experiences took place in the colony, and are recorded in Australian archives (or, more rarely, in overseas archives). In principle, such records will find their way into the British RED, as they should; but should they also appear in the AusRED? There seems no good reason why not, but it would surely be desirable to avoid duplication of labour and disk-space.

The question of colonial immigrant readers leads naturally to a related, possibly somewhat contentious question, that of fictional accounts of reading – or, as I would rather put it, accounts of reading in fiction. Australian colonial fiction, like British Victorian fiction, is particularly rich in such accounts,<sup>6</sup> and nobody could doubt their great interest and value to historians of reading. One thinks in this context of the work of recent British reading-historians like James Raven,

Helen Small, Naomi Tadmor and Kate Flint – but also of an older figure like Amy Cruse – as having all made sophisticated use of fictional scenes of reading.<sup>7</sup>

But even if fictionalized reading is granted a legitimate place in monographs, a real question remains as to whether it belongs in a RED. The British RED have said in effect, ‘No, fictional accounts of reading are not evidence of actual reading performances. *Ergo*, they do not belong in an historical database.’<sup>8</sup> Personally, I incline to the view that if the available disk-space, research time, and financial resources are all adequate, and if in addition there are good intellectual reasons to include fictional reading experiences in the AusRED, then one may as well do it. *Are there such reasons?* To this I would say a guarded and qualified Yes, mainly on the grounds that fictional representations of reading, whether they be seen as reflections, imitations, idealizations or hypotheses of actual reading performances, do reveal much about the assumptions, attitudes and values of the reading culture that produces them. Furthermore, if one thinks of an AusRED not just as a repository of information, but as an active driver of new research projects in the historiography of reading – and why would we not? – then the range of project-types that a RED could serve would, I think, be significantly wider *with* fictional content than *without*. Clearly though, fictional examples need to be clearly tagged as fictional, and perhaps ‘quarantined’ as a separate subset from the rest of the database.

A similar case to that for including fictional material could of course also be made for including visual images of reading and readers. Images of all kinds – drawn, painted, sculpted, engraved and photographed – have been much used, sometimes quite intensively, by British reading-historians such as Kate Flint and Adrian Johns, and indeed by Martyn Lyons in the second

volume of the History of the Book in Australia.<sup>9</sup> But images of reading, like fictional representations of reading, are specifically excluded under the British RED protocol.<sup>10</sup>

I would certainly be inclined, *pace* the British, to include images in an AusRED if it proved to be technically feasible. Social facts about the history of reading cannot be simply read-off from images, even photographic images, any more than they can from fictional descriptions of reading; but the interpretative activity necessary for understanding all such highly mediated sources is properly the task of the user, not the builder, of a database. And it is precisely this kind of nuanced and context-aware cultural reflection and synthesis that a Reading Experience Database, with its wide – indeed potentially limitless – historical and international scope, combined with its intensive focus on the act of reading texts, can promote.

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<sup>1</sup> Very few studies of reading unite the macro and micro perspectives. A recent exception might be Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Class* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); but this book – though received with great enthusiasm in some quarters – was elsewhere felt to lack coherence and cogency.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/>

<sup>3</sup> Simon Eliot, unpublished conference presentation, 'The History of Reading', Napier University, Edinburgh, 2000. (Unstated on the RED website, but subsequently confirmed.)

<sup>4</sup> 'What is a "reading experience"' on RED website, <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/>.

<sup>5</sup> 'What is a "reading experience"' on RED website, <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/>.

<sup>6</sup> For examples, see my 'Bookishness and Australian Literature,' *Script & Print*, vol. 30, no. 4 (2007), 223-236.



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<sup>7</sup> James Raven, Helen Small and Naomi Tadmor, eds, *The Practice and Representation of Reading* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Amy Cruse, *The Shaping of English Literature* (London: Harrap, 1927); *The English Gentleman and His Books* (London: Harrap, 1930); *The Victorians and Their Books* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1935); *After the Victorians* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1938).

<sup>8</sup> 'What sort of data are we looking for?' on RED website, <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/>.

<sup>9</sup> Kate Flint, *Woman Reader*; Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Martyn Lyons and John Arnold, eds, *The History of the Book in Australia 1891-1945: A National Culture in a Colonised Market* (St Lucia: University of Queensland press, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> 'What sort of data are we looking for?' on RED website, <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/>.