



The John Coffin Memorial Lecture
in the History of the Book
2005

The Political Economy of Reading

Revised edition, October 2012

William St Clair

The Coffin lecture, of which this a revised, corrected, and enlarged version, updated with new relevant statistics, was given and published in 2005. That version is available to be read at www.ies.sas.ac.uk/sites/default/files/files/Publications/Coffin%20lectures/stclair.pdf. It is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 England & Wales License, see <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/uk/> for details. You may copy this work freely for your own use, for teaching, and for research, including downloading from the online text, subject only to the courtesies of attribution. The text may not be altered in any way. Rights to commercial publication are reserved.

The revised version was prepared at the request of the editors of *Lettre Internationale*, who published it in a Romanian translation in print in their summer 2012 issue.

The Political Economy of Reading

William St Clair, revised edition, October 2012¹

I BEGIN BY suggesting some of the large questions that histories of reading can, and in my view, ought to address. What were the conditions within which printed books came into existence in the form that they did, and not in others? How were those books that did come into existence produced, sold, distributed, and read, in what numbers, by which constituencies of readers, and over which timescales? – again asking why these events and happened in the ways that they did and not in others that were possible, so applying a notion of opportunity cost? And what were the consequences of the reading of the texts that were inscribed in, and that were carried by, the books? What were the effects on the minds of their readers, and on the mentalities of the wider society within which the reading took place. By mentalities, a word adopted from the French, I mean the beliefs, feelings, values, and dispositions to act in certain ways that are prevalent in a society at a particular historical and cultural conjuncture, including not only states of mind that are explicitly acknowledged but others that are unarticulated or regarded as fixed or natural. And although I say ‘books’ for convenience, I include journals, newspapers, and other media, and the illustrations they sometimes contain.

These questions are, of course, not new. However, although there has always been much interest in what certain texts mean, how they came to be written, and in the lives of their authors, less attention has been paid to the processes by which the texts reached the hands, and therefore potentially the minds, of different constituencies of readers. I draw many of my findings from the print era in the English-speaking world, roughly the four hundred years from 1500 to 1900, a long sweep of history with many changes. But, in one respect, that era forms a unity. For, during that time, paper imprinted with words or pictures was the only medium by which complex texts, and therefore complex ideas, could be carried in quantity across time and place. I choose 1900, incidentally, not as the end of the print era, but as a way of conventionally marking the moment when, with the arrival of radio and film, printed paper lost its uniqueness. During those four centuries, almost everyone whose opinions on the matter are recorded believed that the reading of books affected the minds of readers, the mentalities of the people, and the fate of the nation. Whether engaged in politics, education, religion, literature, scholarship, science, propaganda, advertising, or censorship, many of the leading men and women of the past tried to use print to spread their ideas and to advance their aims. This was particularly true during the period from the 1790s to the 1830s, that I have studied in detail, an extraordinary rich and innovative time as contemporaries knew. But, we should ask, were they right to regard books and reading as having power over minds? How can we investigate the validity of the assumption?

Literary and intellectual history, two of the disciplines that have traditionally attempted to retrieve historic mentalities, have mainly been written in accordance with what I call the ‘parade of authors’

¹ The empirical evidence for the arguments in this piece, with a fuller discussion of most of the issues, and statistical appendices, can be found in my book. *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: CUP 2004). Also relevant is the chapter ‘Following up *The Reading Nation*’. *Cambridge History of the Book in Britain Volume 6, 1830–1914*. Ed. David McKitterick. Cambridge: CUP 2009. 704–734, in which I addressed some of the scholarly reactions that were available at that time. An interview about the intellectual influences and predecessors that influenced the writing of the *Reading Nation* and *The Political Economy of Reading* was published by the online literary review, *The Browser*, in their FiveBooks series, was published in May 2012, and is available to be read free of charge at the time of writing.

convention. The writings of the past are presented as a march-past of great names described from a commentator's box set high above the column. In English literature, we are offered Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Dickens. In philosophy Hume is followed by Rousseau, Adam Smith, or whichever names the modern writer wishes to include. According to the parade convention, those texts of an age which have later been judged to be the best, or the most innovative, in a wide sense, are believed to catch the essence, or some of the essence, of the historical situation from which they emanated. It is a convention centred on newly written works that, for the most part, denies an active role to readers. Another convention that has come in more recently, I call the 'parliament of texts'. This presents the printed writings of a particular historical period as debating and negotiating with one another in a kind of open parliament with all the members participating and listening. Thus, when news of the French Revolution reached Britain, there was an outpouring of books and pamphlets that discussed the implications, and took the debate from questions of immediate policy to philosophical issues about the nature of human society, the role of the state, the justifications for political, social, and gender hierarchies, and much else.

Under both of these conventions, the historian chooses the texts that march in the parade or sit in the parliament. Both approaches can be linked with critical and hermeneutic analyses of the texts which are not time specific, seeking to understand their rhetorical stance and ideological assumptions, and employing, for example, theories of myth to explain the enduring appeal of certain types of narrative. And the texts can be situated in specific contexts. However, as ways of understanding how mentalities may have been historically formed by the historic reading of books, that is by the adoption or otherwise of ideas carried by books, neither approach seems to me to be complete or satisfactory. For one thing, any study of the consequences of the reading of the past ought to consider the books that were actually read, not some modern selection. Nor, in describing the reading of a particular period of the past, can it be enough to draw solely on the texts written during that period, specially significant though these may have been. Much of the reading that took place in the past in the English-speaking world, probably most until very recent times, was of texts written or compiled long ago and far away.

In both parade and parliament conventions, newly written printed texts succeed their predecessors, engage with them, and in some cases defeat or supersede them, and it can be convincingly shown that this happened in certain cases. As far as readers were concerned, however, chronological linearity was not the norm. No historical reader, whatever his or her socio-economic or educational status, read texts in the order in which they were first published. In nineteenth century Britain, for example, many readers read the texts of the Enlightenment only after they had been subjected to an intensive school education in the texts of the Counter-Enlightenment, and many others, including many women, read the Counter-Enlightenment without having read the Enlightenment at all. In the debates on the implications of the French Revolution, Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* was quickly suppressed, and only a few of the other pamphlets were produced in cumulative print runs of more than 500 or 750 copies. But, for Edmund Burke's *Reflexions on the French Revolution*, there are records of over twenty thousand copies being produced and circulated in the early 1790s alone.² Pamphlets were of course often read by more than one reader and circulated through book clubs, and information and ideas can travel by word of mouth. But, of the many men and women who tried to understand the implications of the French Revolution by reading the printed discussions, most must have come to their conclusions on the basis of Burke alone.

When we read a book or essay called, say, 'The Age of Wordsworth', should we not be concerned that, in his lifetime, most of Wordsworth's books were produced in editions of about 500 to 1,000 copies of which many were remaindered or wasted several years after?³ Could that amount of reading have shaped the minds of ten to fifteen million people? Especially when Wordsworth was, on the whole, reinforcing ideas that were mainstream in the culture of his day and earlier? How do we deal with the

2 Figures in *Reading Nation*, 583, 623, and 562.

3 Figures in *Reading Nation*, 660.

fact that over two million copies of Scott's verse and prose romances had been sold in Britain alone by the middle of the nineteenth century, maybe a million more than all other authors put together?⁴ And Scott was regarded by the best critics of the century as the equal of Homer, a great teacher and a model to be followed by adults as well as young people, both in his works and in his life.⁵

Furthermore, readers have never been the inert recipients of meanings carried by texts. They have always had freedom, within their circumstances, to choose which texts to read and which passages to give most attention to, to skip, to argue, to resist, and to read against the grain. As far as children were concerned, if our experience of real children is any guide, their responses were even less constrained. Exclusively text-based approaches, caught in a closed circle, cannot ever, without information from outside the texts, take us to reading or to the consequences of reading.

So what should we do? Part of the answer is to conceive of a past culture not as a parade or as a parliament but as a dynamic system with many interacting agents, into which the writing, publication, and subsequent reading of a text were interventions that had consequences. Since, according to this approach, it was in the minds of readers not just in those of authors, that the engagement between competing texts occurred, we must expect the trajectories of development to be different from those of the first writings, or of the first printings, of texts, as indeed they turn out to be. Which takes me to the 'political economy of reading.'

If that phrase has an eighteenth-century ring about it, that is part of my point. The classical political economists of the Enlightenment investigated the observable consequences of different types of governing arrangements on commodities, trade, prices, employment, incomes, and the physical wellbeing of people. They believed that, by understanding economic systems, they could improve the political management of such systems to bring about improvements in the lives of participants, and for the most part they were successful and the subjects they founded have become well-established disciplines with many achievements. I want to carry that tradition forward into cultural systems, tracing the effects of the governing structures on texts, books, access, readerships, and consequential mentalities. If I had been living in the eighteenth century, I would have called my book, 'An Inquiry into the Political Economy of Knowledge.'

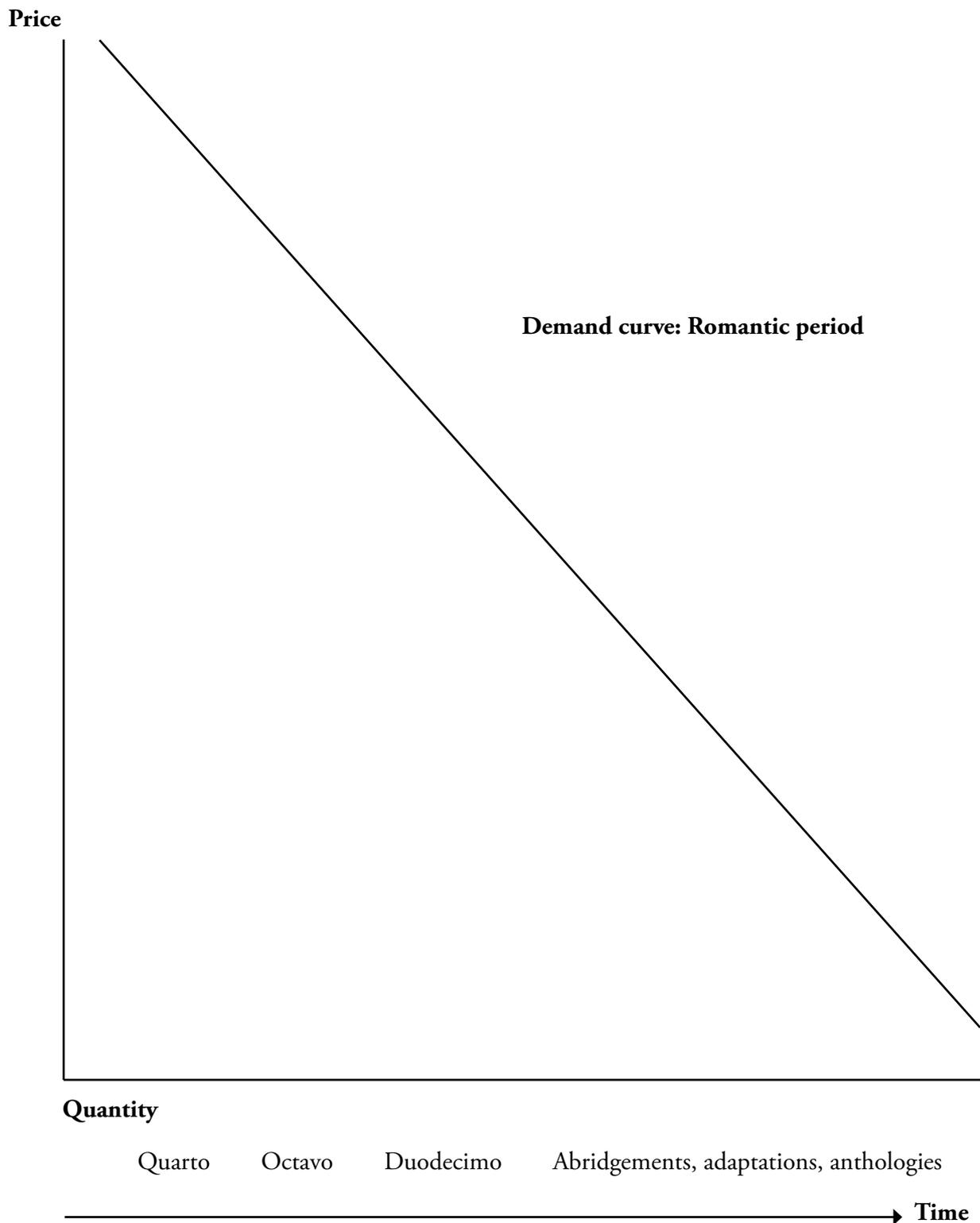
How can we set about developing such a political economy of reading? I begin with the economic aspect of political economy. The 'history of the book' is, among much else, the history of an industry, and there is nothing inappropriate about adopting the conceptual and analytical tools that are successfully employed in understanding the behaviour of industries, especially those with similar characteristics. Indeed the current reliance in histories of books and reading on agent-led historical micro-narrative has severe limitations. There are, for example, parallels with pharmaceuticals and information technology, in which intellectual property is central. And we have a body of well-established, empirically tested, theory about the consequences of different types of economic and business structures.

Table 1 is a simple diagram that illustrates the observed economic behaviour of a publisher of a newly written text in the romantic period. On the vertical column we chart price, on the horizontal, quantity. Within constraints not shown here, the publisher chose where to position his intended book on the demand curve, either selling a small number at a high price or a larger number at a lower price. A publisher who holds the exclusive right to copy and sell a particular text, that is the copyright-holder, will maximise his financial returns if he moves down the demand curve in a series of discrete tranches over time. That is the classic behaviour of a monopolist.

4 Figures in *Reading Nation*, 632.

5 For the high reputation of Scott among all ranks of society through to 1914 and later, see *Reading Nation*, 419. And Bautz, Annika. *The Reception of Jane Austen and Walter Scott*. London: Continuum, 2007. Scott was also much read in translation.

Table 1



One reason why I have shown a classic textbook demand curve is that, in its shape, it neatly matches the actual books of the romantic period. I take two of the most praised and most demanded literary works of the time. Scott's *Lady of the Lake*, moving down the demand curve from quarto, to octavo, and then to duodecimo, and then stopping. And Byron's *Don Juan*, on which, for reasons I need not go into



here, intellectual property rights turned out not to be enforceable.⁶ *Don Juan* was tranced down far further—indeed to the lowest point on the curve obtainable with the technology of the day, tiny books, crammed pages, tiny print, scarcely readable with the naked eye.

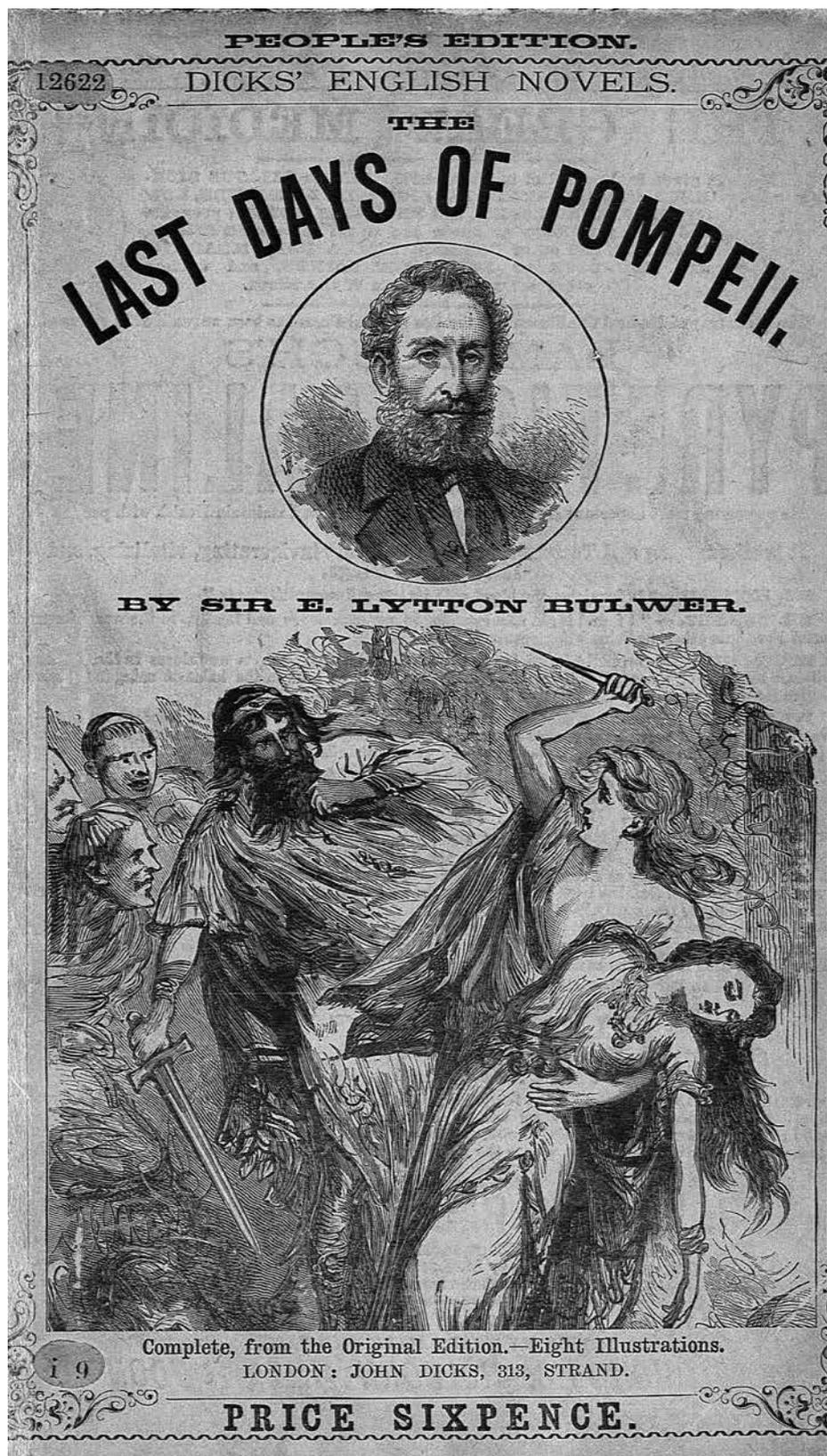
I have the actual numbers for the three main variables, price, quantity, and time. For *The Lady of the Lake*, the prices are, in shillings, 42, 12, 9, a drastic reduction, and the sales rose from about one thousand to tens of thousands. It took fifteen years to move from the large expensive quarto to the smaller less expensive duodecimo. In the case of *Don Juan*, the price fell from 57 to 5 shillings, less than a tenth of the initial price. Sales rose from a few thousand to several hundred thousand. And that move down the demand curve took place in less than two years from the time *Don Juan* was first published as a completed work. *The Lady of the Lake* did eventually follow *Don Juan* down the demand curve but not until the 1840s when the copyright expired, prices fell, and access widened even more dramatically.

We can relate the book prices to the incomes of different constituencies of potential buyers and readers. The quarto volumes, for example, cost the buyer the equivalent of about a third of the weekly income of a gentleman, say a retired senior captain of Nelson's Royal Navy whose income was about 100 shillings a week. The tiny editions of *Don Juan* by contrast became affordable by clerks, artisans, and others hitherto excluded from modern reading. During the romantic period, incidentally, there were no free public schooling nor free public libraries, no railways or rapid communication between people. My simple demand curve, therefore brings out the relationships between the governing regime of intellectual property, price, production, access, and the timing of access, that operated at that time in all its starkness.

The general applicability of the textbook demand curve, and the difference in the trajectories of production and consumption, emerge even more vividly from the history of Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii*, one of the most praised and read novels of the Victorian era, of which the figures have for the first time recently been recovered from publishers' archives.⁷

⁶ Discussed in chapter 16 of *The Reading Nation*.

⁷ The evidence is set out with source references in William St Clair and Annika Bautz, 'The Last Days of Pompeii', in *Victorian Literature and Culture* (2012.2 autumn 2012) and the catalogue of *Decadence, Apocalypse, and Resurrection*, an exhibition opening at the Getty Villa, California, in September 2012.



The Last Days of Pompeii, title page, cheap edition, 1880.

Table 2

The Last Days of Pompeii, production and prices in Britain

Date (000s)	Price in shillings	Production 000s of copies
1834 3 volumes	31.5	1
1839 1 volume	5	5
1850 1 volume	3.5	not available
1853 to 1873	2 or less	500
Equivalent to annual sales of		25
1873–79 different editions		37
1879 first paperback	0.5	60
1880 Title goes out of copyright, many competing editions at different prices of which Routledge alone:		
1885–1897	3.5	9
1885–1897	2	11
1885–1897	0.5	46
c. 1900 Penny Novels abridged	0.05	?200–300

The record matches what appears to be the general pattern of Victorian fiction, namely a small, very expensive, initial edition aimed at, and self censored for, the richest one or two percentiles of society, followed by a move down the demand curve during the period of copyright as each tranche of the market is taken and readerships widen, to be followed by a flood of cheap editions (as well as continuing more expensive editions) the moment the text came out of copyright.

The patterns for *The Last Days of Pompeii* can be directly related to the political economy governing structures unique to its age, including especially the censoring influence on the nature of the text of the market power of commercial lending libraries, the technology of stereotype plates, and the intellectual property regime.

This example also brings out the limitations of treating printed literature as existing independently of other cultural media. *The Last Days of Pompeii*, for example, appears to have been drafted with associated media in mind, theatrical versions, songs, and visual spectacles, many of which were encountered far more often than the novel, but were related to it in a series of feedbacks both anticipated and actual. If we want to assess effects of cultural production on mentalities, we may have to investigate the political economy of viewerships, both of performed versions and of book illustrations, as well as readerships.⁸

For most of the print era in England, the *Lady of the Lake* pattern was the norm, although of course not all texts conform so neatly, and only a small number were ever reprinted at all. Until 1774 English publishers practised perpetual intellectual property and stayed high on the curve. Indeed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they crept higher up, selling smaller numbers at higher prices, and abandoning the lower tranches. And when perpetual monopoly was ended by the courts after a long period in which the statute law was ignored by the industry, and the lower tranches were opened up,

8 Discussed, with quantification and visual illustrations, in St Clair and Bautz, article in *Victorian Literature and Culture*.

Pavilion Theatre.



Stage Manager, Mr DIBDIN FITT.

On **MONDAY, January 19th, 1835, and DURING THE WEEK,**

The Performances will commence with an entirely new Historical Spectacle and Romance, entitled

THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII, OR THE CITY OF THE DEAD!

As Designated by the Immortal Sir Walter Scott.

The extensive Scenery by Messrs. Gordon, Dearlove, Gordon, Jun., and Brunelag. The Machinery by Mr Hagley and Assistants. Properties by Mr Blamire and Assistants. The Music, entirely New, by Mr E. Woolf. The Arcs by Mr. Dibdin Pitt.

The whole written and adapted to the Stage by Mr FABRELLI, and produced under the immediate Direction of Mr DIBDIN FITT.

Glaucus, (a young Athenian) Mr FREE R.	Calenus, (a Priest of Isis) Mr FORDE.	Arbaces, (an Egyptian Magician) Mr COBHAM
Sellust, (an Epicure) Mr GARTHWAITE.	Clodius, (a Gamester) Mr JOHNSON.	Lapidas, Mr COURTNEY.
Apepidus, (a young Priest) Miss HAINSMAN.	Lydon, (a Gladiator) Mr CHAPMAN.	Vespian, Mr FRANKS.
Burbo, (a Wine Seller) Mr SAKER.	Tetraides, (a Gladiator) Mr SHOARD.	Medon, (his Father) Mr LEWIS.
Neger, (a Gladiator) Mr MILLER.	Sporius, Mr DEARLOVE.	Pansa, Mr GRAHAM.
Arcus, Mr CHIPINO.	Darius, Mr JONES.	Diomed, Mr RIGNOLD.
Calvus, Mr SMITH.	Calvus, Mr SMITH.	The Witch of Venusius, Mr DIBDIN FITT.
Nedis, (a blind Thessalian Flower Girl) Miss COOPER.	Ione, (Sister to Apepidus) Miss J. GRANT.	Principal Gladiators, by THE BUFFO BROTHERS.
Julia, (Diomed's Daughter) Mrs WINGROVE.	Coranna, Miss SAKER.	Fulvia, Mrs GASKELL.
Mysis, Miss MELSON.	Statomire, (Wife to Harbo) Mr MOULTON.	Celestus, Miss MAYNER.

PROGRAMME OF THE NEW SCENERY.

HOUSE OF GLAUCUS.
 The Beach, with distant View of Vesuvius, and part of Pompeii.
 INTERIOR OF A POMPEIAN VILLA.
 APARTMENT IN THE HOUSE OF IONE.
 FLASH HOUSE IN POMPEII, THE CLASSIC RING IN ITS ZENITH.
 PORTICO OF THE MAGICIAN ARBACE'S PALACE.
 Spacious Hall of Mystery, Colossal Head of the Goddess Isis. Enchanted Vision.
 Grand Ballet produced under the Direction of Mr. E. YARNOLD.
SHOCK OF AN EARTHQUAKE!
 View of Pompeii, Harbour and surrounding Country.
 MANSION OF DIOMED.
EGYPTIAN PALACE.
 NECROMANTIC ABODE OF THE WITCH OF THE MOUNTAIN.
 Ruins of the TEMPLE of CYBELLE, and Sacred Grove, by Moonlight.
 MANSION OF THE MAGICIAN.
 THE OSCAN ARCHES BENEATH THE MANSION OF ARBACES.
 STREET LEADING TO HERCULANEUM.

Arena and Amphitheatre

OF POMPEII.
 FIGHT OF THE GLADIATORS—GLAUCUS IS DOOMED TO THE TIGER.
ERUPTION OF VESUVIUS!!
 SEA OF LAVA, SHOWER OF FIRE AND PUMICE STONES.
 And TOTAL DESTRUCTION of the CITY of POMPEII.

On WEDNESDAY and THURSDAY, the Interlude of a
Medley of Lovers.
 Sir Archy M'Sarceam, Mr DIBDIN FITT.
 Sir Callaghan O'Irallaghan, Master FORDE.
 Bean Mordecai, Mr LEWIS. Servant, Mr CHIPINO.
 Squire Groom, Mr FREER.
 Miss Charlotte Goodchild, Miss HAINSMAN.

On FRIDAY and SATURDAY, the admired Burletta of The
Irishman in London.
 Mr. Frost, Mr SAKER. Captain Seymour, Mr. CHAPMAN.
 Edward, Mr FORDE. Murloch Delaney, MASTER FORDE.
 Coloney, Mr COURTNEY. Simon, Mr GARTHWAITE.
 Caroline, Miss HAINSMAN. Louisa, Miss I. COOPER.
 Cobbo, Mr SAKER.

To conclude with an entire NEW COMIC PANTOMIME, written expressly for this Theatre, and produced, with new Scenery, Dresses, Properties, Mechanical Changes, Dances, Chorusses, Tricks, Tableauz, Laughable Incidents, Comic Situations, Dramatic Effects, and all the Paraphernalia appertaining to the production of a Splendid Pantomime, called

Hot Boil'd Beans & Very Good Butter, Or Harlequin and the Elf's Supper.

Giles Gillyflower, (a youthful Farmer, in love with Silvia) Mr RIGNOLD, afterwards Harlequin, 1st. Buffo Brother.
 Lawyer Leech, (a Gentleman that sticks to his client) Mr CHAPMAN. Squallum O-Yes, (Parish Beadle and Bellman) Mr MILLER.
 Gaffer Grizly Greystalk, (an avaricious Farmer, and Priest of the Bean Fields) Mr LEWIS, afterwards Pantaloon, 2nd. Buffo Brother.
 Simon Spindleshank, (a Gawky protégé of Gaffer) Mr GRAHAM, afterwards Clown, 3rd. Buffo Brother.
 Amen Grub, (a Clerk of the Victualling Office, as well as the Parish) Mr GARTHWAITE.
 Marrowbones and Chevrins, Messrs. Cow-leg, Ox-foot, Bump-hard, and Thump-hard.
 Silvia, (Ward of Gaffer Greystalk) afterwards Columbine, Miss BAYNER, from the Theatre Royal, Brighton.
 Becky Butterwing, (Servant to Gaffer Greystalk) Miss HAINSMAN.
Supernaturals.—The Fairy Dewbriht, (protecting Geni of the Young Lovers) Miss ISAACS.
 Sadlight, (the Sybil of the Gloom) Mr SHOARD. (Next as before.)

BOXES 1s. 6d.—Half-price 1s. PIT 1s.—Half-price 6d. GALLERY 6d.—no Half-price.
 Half-price Commences at Half-past Eight.
 Doors Opened at Six o'Clock, on application at the Box Office from 11 to 1. Family or Select Boxes to be had nightly.
 Performances to commence at Half past Six o'Clock precisely.

The Last Days of Pompeii, *playbill*

we see that prices tumbled, production soared, and access widened. For example, in the case of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, first published in 1719, the archival records of publishers and printers show that, although it had been regarded as a 'best seller' from the day it was published, it had sold more copies within a few years of the ending of perpetual copyright, than in its first half century.⁹ With Shakespeare, within twenty-five years of 1774, more copies were sold than in the one hundred and fifty years since the first collected edition, the 'first folio' of 1623. And, if you are thinking that the fall in price was due to mechanisation of book manufacturing, as is often asserted, that was not the case. The books that poured from the English presses in rising numbers at falling prices after 1774 were manufactured by traditional hand-craft methods largely unchanged since Gutenberg.

On the lower part of my textbook demand curve diagram, I have mentioned anthologies, abridgements, and adaptations. They are part of the means by which ideas were, and are, diffused, in economic terms 'trickle down'. They enabled longer texts to be made available to wider readerships, including young people, to the less-well educated, and to the economically disadvantaged. They help to bind a society together, uniting the reading experiences of one generation with that of others, introducing children to texts which they may later read in more sophisticated versions, and maintaining a shared memory across time, place, and social situation. One pattern that I noticed in my scrutiny of the archival record is that, quite suddenly, in about 1600, the English book industry stopped producing texts of this kind that drew on copyrighted material and the restrictions continued. There were, for example, no abridgements of the eighteenth century novels, of Adam Smith, of Gibbon, of the English translations of Homer or Virgil, long works that cry out for abridgement.

The judicial decision of 1774 to enforce the statute law of 1710 not only enabled innumerable complete texts to be read by millions who had previously been excluded but resulted in a flood of anthologies, abridgements, and adaptations that drew on the same body of older texts and carried the ideas to even larger constituencies including children.

The patterns relating to abridgements, anthologies, and adaptations, Alps on the landscape of book history, were not brought to light either by traditional descriptive bibliography or by narrative history. But, as with the practice of tranching down the demand curve, once noticed, the explanation jumps from the page. The business purpose was to prevent the high price market in the complete texts from being undermined. Since the clampdown was not retroactive, the older texts, that is those for which an intellectual property ownership claim had been made before 1600, continued to be reprinted. This resulted in the build-up of vested commercial interests in prolonging the existence of the older texts that had been first printed before the clampdown.¹⁰ A political economy approach helps to explain why after 1774 the reading nation grew rapidly until near universality was reached by the end of the nineteenth. It explains why Shakespeare disappeared from popular reading, from 1594 to 1808, and why a body of texts of mediaeval romance that had been continuously favoured for many centuries should suddenly lose all appeal around 1800.

The time lags in access that resulted from these governing economic structures and business practices were not trivial. For example, in the romantic period, a large constituency of middle class readers were caught in the print of texts produced in an England of two or more generations before, texts that became more out of line with their real life experience every passing year. The poor were caught in texts first printed several hundred years earlier, English language bibles, almanacs, chapbook abridgements of mediaeval and Renaissance romance such as *Guy of Warwick*, *Bevis of Hampton*, and *the Seven Champions of Christendom*. Those at the top of the demand curve could of course buy the less expensive books and many did. Samuel Pepys and James Boswell, for example, loved the old abridged chapbooks and made collections. But those at the lower tranches could not regularly buy access to the books in which more modern texts were inscribed.

9 Some of the main archival figures in *Reading Nation* 507. This finding, that has been questioned, depends upon considering print runs, not just numbers of titles recorded in catalogues.

10 Discussed in Chapter 4 of *Reading Nation*.

Although I have given literary examples, the same broad patterns are discernible across the whole range of printed texts, science, medicine, philosophy, history, and so on. Those at the top had modern knowledge, those at the bottom had superseded knowledge, those at the top had clinical medicine, others had folklore and unwanted children. Those at the top had science, the rest had astrology. And the effects on minds were cumulative, affecting the horizons of expectations of succeeding generations.¹¹ What this simple diagram shows is a reading nation in which different layers of readers interacted with texts of differing degrees of modernity and obsolescence within their economic circumstances and cultural horizons.

Some may quibble at my use of the word ‘obsolescence’ in this context. I do not wish to imply that the longer the time that has passed since a text was first produced or made available in print, the less valuable, or useful it must necessarily be. By the same argument, ‘long-lived’ texts do not become admirable just because they were first produced long ago. Readers have often been able to draw contemporary, maybe even universal, meanings from texts that are not contemporary, sometimes from unpromising material, and there are innumerable examples of men, women, and young people successfully surmounting the obstacles to access to knowledge and education brought about by high prices. But, for an understanding of the political economy of reading, we should beware of putting too much weight on anecdotal evidence whose representative quality is uncertain. George Craik’s *The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties: illustrated by anecdotes* was a Victorian favourite, but occasional exceptions, reassuring though they may be in some ways, also confirm that the norm was the norm.¹²

As for what I call the parliament model of literary studies, it continues to thrive. We have seen a spate of books recently that I call ‘in the imagination’ books, where the author, rightly distrustful of taking the great canonical authors as representative of an age, makes his or her anthology of non-canonical texts. So a scholar might bring together a piece of political writing, a play, a long forgotten novel written by a woman, and a book of advice on children’s education, that were all produced at much the same time, and the author then makes critical and sometimes historical remarks about them and ‘the imagination’ of the society from which they emanated. This kind of study is, frankly, not difficult in the age of online texts, but I am sceptical about the methodology or the general usefulness of what such studies can tell us, given that there is an infinitude of texts from which such anthologies can be compiled and an infinitude of criteria for making the selections. What claim can such anthologies have to represent the ‘imagination’ of an age? And they are of little help in addressing the larger questions that I am more interested in with which I began, such as: How did books and reading help to shape mentalities? Why and how do societies change? What are the historical processes – that must involve the competition between ideas being carried in material form – that have brought us, as societies, to our present mental states?

Such ‘in the imagination’ studies appear to me to be a residue of the romantic notion that printed texts can, and deserve to be, scrutinised as autonomous cultural productions without paying regard to the material – and the wider political economy – conditions under which they came into being in the textual form that they did, without paying attention to the active contribution to the making of meanings made by readers, or to the many alternative texts that the readers of the texts, if there were any, had access to, and may have been influenced by.

Doing the empirical spadework and the analysis of the political economy governing structures, such as I advocate, does not of course take us directly to what happens to the mind in reading, or to the results of reading, but is, I would say, an indispensable step, before tackling the more difficult questions. And these more difficult questions are still present, even if shied away from, in all studies that do not look beyond the text.

11 For a discussion of this key concept adopted and applied from the Konstanz school of Jauss and Iser see *Reading Nation* chapter 14.

12 In Clare Pettitt’s phrase, ‘if the self-made man remains a “wonder”, the threat to the status quo is limited’. Clare Pettitt, *Patent Inventions, Intellectual Property and the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 77.

What determined the shape of the demand curve? Many factors we can think of — literacy, incomes, horizons, censorship, appeal to readers, none of which are static, and all of which have to be investigated and factored in. The curve for books as a whole, for example, looks very steep in the century before the romantic period, in the sense that the number of additional copies which were sold if the price was reduced was modest. By 1900, as a result of a virtuous circle of cheaper books leading to more reading, it had become much flatter as more and more men, women, and children joined the reading nation.

I next discuss the effects of the changing technology. To my initial surprise, I found that the figures for edition sizes, that is print runs per edition, for British books in the early nineteenth century were not all that different from those found in the previous centuries of the print era, when the population, the economy, and the market for books were only a fraction of what they had become. The normal range, from about 500 to 3,000 copies per edition, with a few outliers on either side, is similar in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy for which there are sixteenth-century figures. It seems to be constant across Europe and North America. Only in the mid nineteenth century, with the introduction of printing by stereotype plates do we see much of a change and some print runs become longer.

Why, we should ask, did the coming of print in fifteenth-century Europe result in more texts? Surely the political and ecclesiastical leaders of the time, who controlled the book industries and often claimed a monopoly of truth, should have preferred more copies of the existing body of texts? There is a micro-economic explanation relating to the marginal costs of producing extra copies. With moveable type, after about 3,000 copies, since the costs of paper and of pressing are broadly proportional to the number printed, with only the costs of type setting offering opportunities for economies of scale, the producer of a book maximises his returns relative to his costs and risks by putting the type back in the case, and starting again with a new edition if expected demand exceeds 3,000 or in many cases a far lower figure.

In the age of manufacture by stereotype that began in Britain in the 1820s, the microeconomics of text copying are radically different from those of the age of exclusively moveable type that preceded it.¹³ And the problems of assessing production, if we do not have archival sources, are severe. In the nineteenth century a high proportion of print was undated — perhaps deliberately so to offset readerly resistance to perceived obsolescence, a phenomenon we see returning with print-on-demand. For many types of print, reliance on numbers of titles in catalogues as a surrogate for output or for reading can be so misleading as to be worthless. We know, for example, from the firm's archives, that one firm alone, Frederick Warne over forty years ran off fifty impressions, ranging from 24,000 to 250 copies per impression from plates of *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron*. The plates produced a total of over 170,000 copies, plus an unknown further number before the plates were melted in 1937. In terms of 'titles' or 'editions' as judged by changing title pages, this vast output counts as two.

The political economy point is this. In the past, the differing technological and economic limitations on manufacturing of copies of texts changed the balance of production, and therefore of reading, between old and new texts. Some technologies encouraged the production of more copies of the existing body of texts. Moveable type encouraged the production of more newly composed texts. I have summarised these patterns in the Table 3.

Table 3

MANUFACTURING: Tendencies

Manuscript era

Encouraged the production of more copies of the existing body of texts relative to new texts.

Promoted stability/obsolescence in the culture

¹³ Discussed in *Reading Nation* 179–184, 416–418. And more fully with more figures in 'Following up *The Reading Nation*.'

Exclusively moveable type, 1500–1835

Encouraged the production of more new texts relative to existing texts

Promoted dynamism/change in the culture

Stereotype and electrotype, 1835–1914

Encouraged the production of more copies of the existing body of texts relative to new texts

Promoted stability/obsolescence in the culture

Twentieth century

[We do yet have enough quantified information available for the patterns to be identified with confidence]

Electronic age, 1990s onward

It is technologically possible for both new and old texts to be copied and circulated instantaneously, at infinitesimal cost, in unlimited numbers. And some modern enterprises are using the new technology to promote open access without any diminution of intellectual quality. However, in other cases, the governing structures of intellectual property devised before 1500 for the moveable type era risk perpetuating the patterns of demand curves, production, price, and access observable in the age of print.

I turn now to the last link in the chain of the analysis. When we have retrieved historic reading patterns, can we perceive an overlap with subsequent historic mentalities? Can we confirm that the universal assumption that reading had consequences for mentalities was valid? Obviously there is more scope for judgement and interpretation in answering this question than in the others noted so far, some of which are largely factual. And, in order to avoid circularity, we need to use manifestations of mentalities that are external to the texts. For myself, having done the political economy work in considerable detail for a particular historical period, I do discern a recognisable correspondence between historic reading patterns and consequent mentalities. The correlation is far from exact, but over the whole print era, the links, both general and particular, between texts, books, reading, and wider consequences appear to be secure. For example the persistence of rural religious pre-Enlightenment constructions of essential Englishness into the industrialised urban world, the emergence of a distinctively working class sceptical urban reformist culture, and the persistence in belief in astrology and other ancient supernaturals — in all these cases, the overlap is with books and readers not with authors and texts. We also have the astonishingly neat overlap between the immersion of the English-speaking reading nation for over a century in the neo-chivalric romances of Walter Scott, the values of Victorian Britain, and the states of mind that we detect in the American Civil War and the First World War, connexions that had been remarked upon by Mark Twain, Paul Fussell, and others.

If I am right, and it is accepted that reading has been shown to have historically shaped mentalities, then the implications are immense. For, having disconnected outcomes from traditional text- and author-centred approaches, we have connected them to other ways of understanding complexity. One striking conclusion is the extent to which simple, well-understood, and empirically well-tested economic models, such as price and quantity, monopoly and competition, have been able to account for the behaviour of the printed book industry, and therefore also the patterns of readerly access, during all the centuries when print was the paramount medium. The study has shown that the tendency of

monopolistic industries to pay most attention to the topmost tranches of the market, to move slowly down the demand curve, to ration supply to the market in order to protect the market value of their properties, to neglect large constituencies of the market altogether or to supply them with obsolete and often shoddy goods, can be observed in the monopolies and cartels operated by the printed book industry through the institutions of private intellectual property. Basic economic models can, therefore, help to explain how the reading nation came to be divided into overlapping layers of readers, differentiated not only by income, by socio-economic class, and by educational attainment, but by the degree of obsolescence of the print to which each layer had access. To have linked mentalities to historical reading is, therefore, to have linked them to the economics of the production and marketing of texts in the age of print.

I now turn to the politically decided component of the political economy of reading. In Table 4, I offer worked examples of the effects of different types of governing regime ranging from private monopoly ownership of all texts in perpetuity, as in England until 1774, total absence of intellectual property as in eighteenth-century Ireland, and various forms of mixed, protectionist, and offshore regimes. Again you may wish to dispute my data or my inferences from them, although nobody has yet done so – nor indeed do I know of any alternative political-economy-type data having been collected, other than some that confirm or that require some amendment to my tables, but do not invalidate the findings. What I emphasise is that, in every one of these regimes, we can trace the effects of the politically decided regime on the behaviour of the book industry, the shape of the demand curve, and trace the consequences for prices, access, timing of access, horizons, and readerships, and therefore on the constituting of knowledge among different constituencies.

Table 4

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY REGIMES: Consequences

Private beneficial monopoly ownership of all texts from Bibles to ballads, in perpetuity. England until 1774

Produced a stable and prosperous industry, in which authors, publishers, manufacturers, and distributors were increasingly well rewarded.

Enabled long and substantial new works of lasting value to be carried into print.

Concentrated the benefits on the richer members of society, tended to delay and restrict access for others, and held back the majority from access to modern printed knowledge.

Almost complete absence of intellectual property. Eighteenth-century Ireland

Irish book industry became an offshore centre, reprinting texts originating in Great Britain, mainly for export.

Local economic benefits in employment, and cultural benefits for the local English-speaking population who had access to many modern texts at a fraction of British prices.

Mixed systems 1. Copyright one generation. Scotland 1714 to 1808. England 1774–1808

Huge expansion of the book industry, of new writing, and of access to reading of recent works.

Period coincides with flourishing of the Scottish Enlightenment and British romantic period.

Mixed systems 2. Copyright two/three generations. United Kingdom until 1911

Expansion continued. Period of tranching down lengthened. Price of access to new texts compared with the old widened.

Mixed system 3. Asymmetrical. Short copyright for locally produced texts, none for imported texts. Early United States

Enabled a profitable American printed book industry to develop. Disbenefitted foreign authors.

Produced immense benefits to the United States by encouraging an inflow of modern knowledge from the intellectual centres in Europe.

By making the price of access to literary texts of British origin cheaper than access to those produced locally, reinforced the intellectual hegemony of British texts which the colonists had hoped to throw off.

Offshore. Seventeenth-century Netherlands, eighteenth-century Ireland, early nineteenth-century Paris

Mitigated the censoring power of British political, ecclesiastical, and corporate institutions.

Enabled textual controls on libel, pornography, etc., to be circumvented.

Mitigated the power of price to deny or restrict access.

Precursors of Creative Commons: Eighteenth-century examples of authors refusing copyright in order to reduce the price, widen the access, and increase the potential impact of the reading of their words.*

Paine's *Rights of Man*, 1791.

William Fox on the Slave Trade, 1790.

Both pamphlets were influential almost at once. The slave trade, scarcely questioned before the 1780s, was legally abolished in 1808.

Contemporary world 1. Globalised copyright, almost perpetual, divided into ever smaller packets, over a widening range of texts.

Risks a return to the socially differentiated patterns of access to modern information and knowledge of pre-1774 England.

Contemporary world 2. Emergence of new forms of publication that offer a better balance between producers and consumers, and make access cheaper and swifter

Notably Creative Commons, print-on-demand and other technologies, and Open Access.** Also free internet resources of knowledge such as Wikipedia, sometimes compiled by crowd sourcing. The Digital Public Library of America, and other free-to-read resources should greatly widen access, but the long, in practice near perpetual, copyright regime means that such resources are likely to consist only of texts published several generations ago, so conforming to the textbook demand curve of the print age.

* *Reading Nation*, 257, 624.

** Readers are encouraged to visit the website of Open Book Publishers, of which I am chairman of the board of directors. <http://www.openbookpublishers.com/>

In general, it emerges that the development of virtually all aspects of texts, books, and reading, including the English-language Bible and Shakespeare, have been influenced by the three main governing structures of the print era, private intellectual property in the hands of the text-copying industry, cartelisation within the industry, and a close alliance between the state and the industry in which the industry delivers textual policing and self-censorship in exchange for economic privileges, of which long copyright is the most restrictive. It emerges too that the governing structures of private intellectual property enforced and guaranteed by the state, which, in England, were first put in place in the early sixteenth century and, although constantly undermined by manuscript, pirate, and offshore publication, had a large measure of success in achieving their aims. If the findings of my inquiry are confirmed, then it follows that these governing structures helped to determine society itself, affecting every stage of cultural formation from textual production, through the choice, production, and distribution of print, to readerly access, readerly horizons, choice of reading, reception, and consequent mentalities. And these conclusions and findings about the consequences of different types of regime hold true irrespective of the actual texts that are being turned into books, throughout the print era. We have here, I suggest, the framework within which the role of particular texts can be traced. We have useable models for the political economy of reading.

The fierce debates about intellectual property that occur today are mainly conducted not in terms of political economy but in absolutist, metaphorical, and ideological language that either ignores consequences or tries to argue that they are irrelevant.¹⁴ One is the language of property and of theft, but such absolutist language obscures the main point about the nature of intellectual property. For intellectual property is essentially different from real property. One is physical and visible. The other is immaterial and invisible. The custom and practice of real property have existed throughout recorded human history, in essentials unchanged at any rate in the Western tradition. Intellectual property is a European invention of the fifteenth century which has subsequently been subject to many changes in law and in practice. With a piece of real property, say a house, the owner can make drastic alterations and the result will still be recognisably the same house. But the owner of a house cannot make a second house by making an abridgement of the first house. If the house is divided among a number of people, each can only enjoy a share, and the more the property is divided the smaller the share that each one gets. With intellectual property, on the other hand, division need not lead to any diminution of utility. My experience of reading Shakespeare is not diminished if you read Shakespeare. In economic terms, reading is a non-rivalrous good.

In addition to 'property', the present arguments about intellectual property are permeated with another absolutist language, the author as unique 'creator', who has the right to own and defend his creation. But we know historically that even the most creative writers, such as Shakespeare, did not start with nothing, but adapted what already existed, and innumerable empirical studies confirm that most works are socially produced. No one, whether author or intellectual property owner can reasonably claim that any substantial text has been compiled solely from privately owned materials. By its use of language, which is essentially social, by its appeal to memory and readerly notions of genre, and by its repetition of recognised old as well as new sentiments, all texts inescapably draw on knowledge which they share with their readers. Indeed, without the shared public element, texts would have had little or no appeal to readers. The intellectual property in every newly printed text is, in effect, the asserting of a private ownership claim over part of a language and intellectual domain which has previously been both open to the public and free. However, in the English book industry by the seventeenth century, the whole discourse of property as it applied to real property, including the penalties for stealing it, damaging it, and trespassing on it, the political rights and privileges attached to the possession of it, and the legal protections against confiscation, was being applied to this recently invented form of private wealth.

¹⁴ Discussed in my essay, 'Metaphors of Intellectual Property' in *Privilege and Property: Essays on the History of Copyright*, edited by R. Deazley, M. Kretschmer, L. Bently (Cambridge: Open Book, 2010).

Today the texts over which a private property right is being asserted, restrictions placed on their use, and payment sought for quoting from and engaging with them, are becoming ever shorter and the degree of creativity required is minimal. When Warner Brothers learned that Groucho Marx was making a parody of their film *Casablanca*, their lawyers sent him a stern warning. Groucho replied that the Marx Brothers existed long before the Warner Brothers and he claimed rights over Brothers.¹⁵ Today he might not have been able to laugh his way out. And attempts are again being made to use intellectual property to restrict freedom to publish.

I wonder what the political economists and jurists of the Enlightenment would have made of this? If spoken language is the main faculty which holds human beings together in society, they asked, why should written words be private property? Following their lead, we can describe private intellectual property for what it is, a state-guaranteed monopoly right to copy and to sell a text, a restrictive business practice which, if it is to be permitted, has to be justified by the public policy benefits that it may bring to the society that grants the privilege. And that argument about benefits can only be conducted rationally if it is informed by a developing understanding of the actual and likely consequences of different regimes, for readers as well as authors, in other words by a political economy. Such a discussion should, of course, consider the incentives that some types of regime may provide to useful innovation as was agreed in the eighteenth century. But it is a good general rule that whenever there is monopoly, there should also be regulation.

So, returning to the ‘history of the book’, what is needed if we are to develop a political economy of reading? For a start, if we want to do political economy, we have to have economic information. It would be a fairly simple task, with modern technology with many hands contributing, world wide, to place alongside the plentiful information we already have about texts, such scattered information as survives about production, prices, access, and readerships, over time. From such information we will perceive patterns and develop provisional explanatory models. Emerging results can be challenged and either replicated or amended. Emerging results in one reading nation may be transferable, with adaptations, to the experience of others. Such a project would fit well with the other projects at present underway, such as putting texts online or the collecting examples of recorded historic reading. Having information of this kind would enable us to build a fuller and more theoretical understanding of texts, books, reading, and consequences. And, since such information is unlikely to be found for periods after 1900 when there are just too many media and too many transactions, we should improve our understanding not just of ‘the history of the book’ but of cultural production and consumption of all kinds into our own time.

One last point. Contrary to what Wordsworth and other romantic authors and artists in many countries proclaimed, his mind was not formed by experiencing ‘Nature’ direct. When, for example, he claims that “One impulse from a vernal wood May teach you more of man, Of moral evil and of good, Than all the sages can”, we can surely now see that this is nonsense. It is not a perennial truth but a way of thinking common in Wordsworth’s day and earlier, but now of only historical interest. Wordsworth was participating in a tradition that went back many centuries. Nor was the mind of Byron’s Bonnivard chainless and free in the dungeon of Chillon, although his heroic story may have provided encouragement to innumerable readers and listeners. The more complex aspects of our minds — I leave aside the lessons we learn from putting our hand in boiling water — may be, to a larger extent than we understand or care to acknowledge, temporary outcomes of the consumption of the texts to which we and our predecessors have been exposed, texts produced by political and economic processes involving property, and therefore power, that deserve to be investigated. If we wish to improve our understanding of why, as societies, we have come to think the way we do, and to give ourselves, if we choose, a greater degree of freedom, we need a political economy of reading.

15 Discussed by, among others, Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004) 147–48.