

# Rural Reading in Northwest England: The Sedbergh Book Club, 1728-1928.

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## Rural Reading in Northwest England: The Sedbergh Book Club, 1728-1928

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### **Rural Reading in Northwest England: The Sedbergh Book Club, 1728-1928**

*K. A. Manley (bio)*

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## Appendix

The survival of minute books for an English book club dating from the 1720s is an important and unique source for a phenomenon that has been little studied. Country book clubs represent a critical link in the development of “public” libraries. They mark a transition between the informal lending of books among friends and neighbors and the desire to institutionalize and formalize such a practice. They emerged in an era when truly “public” libraries did not exist and before commercial circulating and private subscription libraries proliferated. The educated person with an enquiring mind who might once have enjoyed access to the college or university libraries of Oxford or Cambridge either had to rely on his own purse to furnish a personal library or had recourse to an institution, such as a college, school, or parish library. Institutional libraries are by their nature exclusive as regards both clientele and stock, while parish libraries, where they existed, were generally small and selective; it was never their function to furnish current publications.

Reading is a personal and intense experience, but the book club added a social, and sociable, dimension. The circulating library had a commercial purpose, though some enterprising booksellers did set up book clubs themselves; naturally they supplied the books, for example, John Munby of Beverley, Yorkshire, in 1741,<sup>1</sup> and William Pritchard and others in Derby in the 1790s.<sup>2</sup> In private subscription libraries, books were voted in by a majority of members or by a committee. Commercial elements were also in play; members would have been shareholders, the value of shares being dependent on the value of the bookstock. **[End Page 78]**

Two vital ideas underpin the early eighteenth-century book club: “freedom of choice” and “mutual benefit.” These were new concepts in library service. The book club was the only “library” institution of the time whose members could choose for themselves what books they should buy, unlike the users of an academic or ecclesiastical library. For the country dweller, the book club provided a low-cost means of replicating the stock of an academic library on a reduced scale. They were libraries in miniature, with a constantly changing stock, a microcosm of an

institutional library, with the important difference that the books represented the personal choices of the members. Value for money was a consideration, in that members paid a fee and expected to enjoy the use of a sufficient number of books to make their membership worthwhile. But that was of secondary importance compared with the sociable atmosphere and the convenience of a meeting place to discuss the latest books—and, of course, to enjoy a drink at the same time. Rules still existed: fines were levied, books had to be returned on time, and minutes were taken, but the participants were “amongst friends and equals,” as it were. The books were usually divided among the membership annually. A number of clubs retained books to form a permanent library.

Paul Kaufman and Thomas Kelly began to reveal the history of book clubs between thirty and forty years ago, but much has been discovered in the meantime.<sup>3</sup> The earliest documented book club existed at Meppershall, Bedfordshire, by 1704 and contained twelve members, clergy and gentlemen, who subscribed one pound annually and divided the books among themselves at the end of each year. A purely clerical society is found at Great Paxton, Huntingdonshire, later in the same year. These examples are unlikely to have been isolated, and reading societies may have been prevalent long before. Book clubs may have existed in the seventeenth century, but for much of that period the idea of a group of men meeting in private to discuss the latest productions of the printing presses would have been considered subversive, and, in the previous century, heretical. Clergymen were actively encouraged to found book clubs by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK), established by Dr. Thomas Bray in 1699. In 1710 the society drew up and circulated model rules for the management of book clubs, but it relied on local clergy to gather support to set such societies in...



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