

Common Reading: Critics, Historians, Publics

Review Number:

723

Publish date:

Saturday, 31 January, 2009

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ISBN:

978-0-19-929678-1

Date of Publication:

2008

Price:

£25.00

Pages:

376pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

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Common Reading complements Collini's *Absent Minds* (2006).⁽¹⁾ *Absent Minds* establishes the skeleton of intellectual life in modern Britain; and, if there is more need to put flesh and blood on a 526 page skeleton, *Common Reading* provides it. Collini deals with the cultural function of British intellectuals in *Absent Minds*. That is, he shows how people deployed reputations gained from specialised learning to address questions which have no (or many) answers. In *Common Reading* Collini addresses himself to a wide range of British authors: from Connolly to Orwell, Spender, Rebecca West, A. L. Rowse, to Butterfield and E. P. Thompson. He drifts out of Britain to take up Edmund Wilson, Malraux, and Perry Anderson. Collini also engages larger themes as in his discussion of the 'idealisation' of the Victorian period, the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, and the nostalgia attached to the great 19th-century reviews. The writers with whom Collini is concerned sought to fill the literary space between journalism and academic writing. The essays in *Common Reading* are Collini's way of filling that literary space himself (p. 3).

Auden's description of criticism as writers writing about writing ⁽²⁾ hardly captures the pungency and asperity of Collini's method, as Collini himself recognises. Collini uses Henry James' and Gershom Scholem's aphorisms as prescripts to this book (p. ix): to be critical 'is the only thing to be, and all else is humbug'; 'Not system but *commentary* is the legitimate form through which truth is approached'. Collini takes up Adorno's rather obscure remark that the 'essayist "makes himself into an arena for intellectual experience, without unraveling it"' in order to lay out his own view. He wishes his own essays to 'capture something of the "intellectual experience" of reading, without dissolving the personal and temporal qualities of that experience into more systematic abstractions.' He wishes to rescue 'the business of noticing, characterizing and estimating' from the accusation of condescension which is sometimes lodged against critics (p. 4–5). This is no easy furrow to plow and Collini treads carefully as he attacks his enemy: nostalgia,

Bridesheadism and ‘the stock-in-trade of bufferish keening for the good old days’ (p. 223).

Manner cannot be separated from method and in Collini’s hands both are riddled with wit. Connelly’s ‘hovering preciousness’ could descend into a ‘critical equivalent of *Brideshead Revisited*’ (p. 15). He speaks of Hemmingway as ‘hardly aestheticism’s most exquisite fruit’ (p. 7). Connelly’s writing ‘functioned as a kind of soft porn for the culturally aspirant’ (p. 18). He finds it easy to see Edmund Wilson as ‘the Sidney Greenstreet of literature’ (p. 58). There are ‘hobby farmers’ and ‘hobby historians’ who ‘walk away from the problems whenever the going get tough’ (p. 201). Collini notes the case of Northcliffe, who feeling he had been poisoned by Belgian ice cream, issued a requirement that his newspaper should not cover Belgian news as ‘the earliest example of British tabloid hostility to Brussels’ (p. 218). He discusses the ‘Penguinification’ of British readers and reading in the 1950s and 1960s (p. 272). The ‘intellectual aristocracy’ was ‘more indulgent toward adultery than laziness’ and ‘more forgiving of various forms of nonconformity than any form of vulgarity’ (p. 290). Collini reaches full flight in his assessment of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. He uses its search-engine to fetch out individuals answering to the phrases ‘egoist’, ‘insufferable bore’, ‘careerist’, ‘ruthless businessman’, ‘suffer fools gladly’, ‘forceful personality’, ‘all-round sportsman’, ‘dashing good looks’, ‘attractive to women’. The phrase ‘attractive to men’ finds seven cases, two of them to men and both were ‘attractive to men and women alike’ (p. 311–314). Which is to say that *Common Reading* packs plenty of entertainment in a very serious work of criticism.

What then is ‘common’ about *Common Reading* and what are the ‘publics’ in its subtitle? By ‘common’ Collini does not mean ordinary, popular or vulgar. Once, after a discussion with Vita Sackville-West, Harold Nicolson observed that the life he and his wife lived was “‘good” in a philosophical sense.’ He went on ‘we are humane, charitable, just, and not vulgar. By God, we are not vulgar’.(3) Collini concerns himself with those essayists and historians, such as Nicolson, Sackville-West and the writers in this volume, who wrote for a ‘non-specialized readership’. They were those who in the 19th century were called ‘men of letters’ or the ‘public moralists’ to which Collini addressed himself in an earlier book.(4) They were those who in the 20th century continued to contribute to ‘general and intellectual discussion’ (p. 1). The figures which populate this book – Orwell, Spender, Arthur Bryant, Empson, Butterfield, Carr, Scruton – were those who addressed themselves to ‘publics’ which were ‘in principle open to anyone’ as opposed to predetermined professional societies (p. 2). One of the narratives into which these materials can be classed, therefore, is a narrative of persistence with modification. It is a book which charts the continuation of a general literary culture from the 19th century with its great reviews – the *Quarterly Review*, the *Edinburgh Review*, *Cornhill Magazine* – into the 20th century with its *Horizon*, the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *London Review of Books*. Even the 19th century reviews persisted. The *Edinburgh* only died in 1929, the *Fortnightly* in 1954, the *Quarterly* in 1967, the *Cornhill* in 1975. ‘In France *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, founded in the 1830s in imitation of the *Edinburgh*, still tries to keep up appearances, as, in its diminished way, the *Contemporary* does in Britain’ (p. 228).

There are other narratives into which *Common Reader* might be cast with various degrees of perfection: from orthodoxy to secularism (or various degrees of ambiguity, irony, and doubt); from attached man to letters to alienated intellectual; from amateur to professional; from patronage to market; from general to specialised knowledge; from gentlemen to players. One could go on in a tiresome way: commercialisation, industrialisation, democratisation, bureaucratisation, nationalisation, globalisation, even localisation.(5) Powerful, yet austere, these narratives fail to capture the richness and complexity of the individuals and groups in *Common Reading* who created novelty and who reproduced traditions. Indeed, they are the very sort of abstract nouns which Collini’s method and wit attack.

I, therefore, wish to propose of different narrative. The figures that constitute *Common Reading* not only filled the intellectual space between journalism and the academic world, they filled the political space Habermas famously called the bourgeois public sphere.(6) To call it bourgeois is a way of indicating how the matter in *Common Reading* stands athwart the conventional tradition-novel binary and raises the question of social position. The *dramatis personae* of *Common Reading* doubtlessly belonged to ‘dominant and relatively homogeneous’ elites (p. 4). These were ‘necessarily elites who exercise disproportionate power in most areas of social and cultural life’ (p. 270). It has become fashionable, as Collini notes, to stress

what must be the moral ‘weakness of any kind of socially confident, largely male, ethnically homogeneous’ group (p. 292). Indeed there are risks in these kinds of social formations. There were only 647 contributors to the original *Dictionary of National Biography* and half of it was composed by only 34 people (p. 309). Of the early (anonymous) contributors to the *Times Literary Supplement*, 20% belonged to the Athenaeum and a further 20% belonged to other clubs in St. James. Behind this reticence there is a lack of transparency which may have permitted the choosing of favourites, self-advancement, and secret conniving for (and against) careers. Nils Gilman, in his treatment of the Committee on Comparative Politics of the United States Social Science Research Council, has shown how the consolidation of intellectual formations sometimes occurs ‘as much by excluding and ignoring dissenting voices as through rational persuasion’.(7) Yet such a disposition has a certain self-righteousness about it which can lead to a sniffy and sneering reverse snobbery blinding us to the real work such elites can do.

As Collini points out, belonging to such elites, with their ‘shared assumptions, a common idiom, and collective self-confidence’ also could ‘encourage sophisticated thinking and writing’ (p. 4). ‘[I]n our rush to democratic self-congratulation, we should not lose sight of the ways in which a certain mix of intellectual assurance, secure status, and relaxed agreement on fundamentals can prove fertile ground for thinking of the highest quality’ (p. 292). The original *Dictionary of National Biography (DNB)* and its supplements were composed amidst the social contacts of London’s clubs which teemed with personal knowledge and with a keen interest in the evaluation of vivid personalities.(8) Indeed, the *DNB*, it could be argued, was a ‘complex communicative act’, a ‘monument of official discourse’, to create authority, even liberal authority.(9) Or perhaps Liberal Unionist authority. Leslie Stephen, it appears, included every Irish rebel of 1798 in the *DNB* because he wished to assert the place of Ireland in British history. ‘[T]here was to be no home rule in the *DNB*, and no need for Irish separatism’.(10) Always a skeptic and a pessimist, Stephen’s conception of the nation was pragmatic and inclusive. Even the transvestite (or hermaphrodite) French diplomat and soldier, the Chevalier d’Eon, has his (her) place in the *DNB*. The authority the *DNB* celebrated, therefore, was not national authority but literary authority. It was a tacit, informal, convivial, personal authority, rather than structural authority. It was the authority of the elite to which Leslie Stephen and the authors in *Common Reading* belonged. Of the 19th-century entries in the *DNB* 955 were soldiers, 1,585 were clergymen, and 1,674 were scholars.(11)

How this ‘relaxed agreement on fundamentals’ worked is extremely difficult to know. As Collini points out, the ‘enabling effect’ of belonging to such groups is ‘implicit’ and ‘resistant to demonstration’. The ‘language of elites’ implies ‘clear and fixed identities ... whereas the reality of actual lives is messier and multiple’ (p. 283). Weber gave helpful hints in referring to such groups and people when he said in a time ‘marked by the disenchantment of the world’ values ‘have retreated either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the *brotherliness of direct and human relations*’.(12) And Mannheim referred to people of learning as an ‘unanchored relatively classless social stratum’.(13) The words ‘unanchored’ and ‘relatively’ are particularly attractive. Members of such groups used similarly sociologically indeterminate language to refer to themselves. When Gilbert Murray described the relations among the Cambridge Ritualists, Jane Harrison, Francis Cornford, and A. B. Cooke, he said ‘[w]e somehow had the same general aim and outlook, or something’.(14) The words ‘somehow’ and ‘something’ are telling. In describing Bloomsbury Clive Bell said its members ‘differed widely’ in their ‘opinions, tastes, and preoccupations’, and though ‘they criticized each other ... they liked being together’.(15) Writers and essayists fit into such groups only very loosely. Herbert Thring, who was the secretary of the Authors’ Club and the Authors’ Society wrote: ‘My advice to those about to join literary clubs (unless it be the Athenaeum or the Savile) is don’t’.(16) According to some, the requirements for membership in the Savile Club were quite strict. Candidates had to be atheists and had to have written a book. However, according to the principles of its founding members, the Savile should be a society of ‘different professions and opinions’ and its members should be people of differing ‘tastes, accomplishments and interests’ all united by the motto ‘*Sodalitas-Convivium*’.(17)

Such groups may be ‘dominant’ but, as Collini observes, they are only ‘relatively’ homogeneous (p. 4). They were loosely affiliated reference groups, coherent but still open to novelty. If they were too robust and tight they would be incapable of recognizing what might be fruitful anomalies; if they were too loose their

speculations might spin out into nothingness. Consequently, they might be confident, even dominant, but they were also vulnerable. Because such associations were not wholly cohesive, they were filled with contradictions and inconsistencies. Individuals sought clarity about where they belonged and to whom they belonged. The dissonance created by uncertainty and isolation led some to a cognitive and emotional drive toward some guiding principle. However, this seeking for a guiding principle itself produced, in a sort of competitive way, additional contradictions, uncertainties, and conflicts. Belonging to such groups created awareness of themselves, of others, and of what they knew and did not know. This required trust. Historians have turned their studies to the question of trust, but chiefly with regard to economic transactions.⁽¹⁸⁾ Trust, however, is more than a material matter.⁽¹⁹⁾ Trust is based upon shared memories, reputations, and routines which allow people to do all kinds of business. Bound together by sensibility rather than ideology, such groups construct trust through conviviality, sociability, and civility. In turn trust creates webs of mental, emotional, aesthetic, and moral impulses, restraints, reservations, reflexes, and responses. A good deal of recent research is recovering the role of this kind of personal, even charismatic, authority as a complement to, or even as an attribute of, structural authority in the workings of elite groups.⁽²⁰⁾

The social positions of the members of these affiliative societies were multiple. Henry Sidgwick's name leaps to mind at once. The son of a clergyman-schoolmaster, he was connected by marriage to a Scottish gentry family (the Balfours) and the scientific aristocracy (Lord Rayleigh). He himself was a member of any number of coteries and intellectual societies: the Apostles, the Metaphysical Club, the Synthetic Society, the Eranus Society, the Ad Eundem Society. He was active in the preliminary planning for the British Academy (BA) and would have been a founding fellow had he not died. He represents, therefore, as Collini has pointed out in another place, a case of multiple duties: as philosopher, as professor, and as public moralist.⁽²¹⁾ Similar cases can be found amongst those who figure in *Common Reading*. Aldous Huxley was the grandson of 'Darwin's Bulldog'. His mother was Matthew Arnold's niece. His father was a schoolmaster before becoming the editor of the *Cornhill Magazine*. Huxley himself was educated at Eton and Balliol. William Empson, 'a bohemian Wykemanist of gentry stock' (p. 106), got firsts in Mathematics and English at Magdalene College, Cambridge where Frank Ramsey's father was his supervisor. Banned from Cambridge for improprieties (a servant found condoms in his rooms), he taught in Japan and China before returning to Britain and a career in teaching and criticism. (Empson, in textbooks, Collini points out 'still tends to figure as the star performer of the whizz-bang school of criticism' (p. 107).) G. M. Young, the son of a waterman, was a Prize Fellow of All Souls, a civil servant, diplomat, and man of letters, and the author of *Portrait of an Age* (1936).

Young, however, as Collini points out, had a 'dodoesque status' since his position was more an echo of the social characteristic of 19th-century public moralists than a reflection of his specialized contemporaries (pp. 213–4). All this, then, reflects a shift in British intellectual life. Essayists and writers in *Common Reading* may have had more than one social identity but their associations were more specialised and less likely to overlap with others of their kind. The BA itself marked such a departure. James Ward, the Cambridge philosopher, psychologist and a founding fellow, had been a member of the Synthetic Society. He welcomed the new Academy because, as he remarked to Arthur Balfour, he thought the Synthetic Society was too much of an '*omnium gatherum*' and the Academy 'would afford a better opportunity for philosophic discussions'.⁽²²⁾ As Collini points out, the BA was 'deliberately placing itself at one remove from that "impure" world of Victorian literary and political writing that was now coming to seem, when measured against the high ideals of *Wissenschaft*, largely peopled by amateurs and partisans' (p. 219). Yet, some defied these novelties. H. G. Wells said: 'this world of creative and representative work we do, is I am convinced best anarchic. Better the wild rush of Boomster and Quack than the cold politeness of the established thing' (p. 245). Gilbert Murray, who had been admitted to the Academy in 1910, in a statement of British patriotism, also celebrated a less specialized view in an article praising British scholarship. 'We are always aiming at culture', he wrote. German scholars 'are aiming at research and achievement'. Books published in England, he went on to say, 'are works of professional scholars possessed of much exact learning and a decided spirit of research, yet the moving impulses which produced the books is really the impulse of an artist'.⁽²³⁾

And if these groups were only ‘relatively’ homogeneous, members of these loosely affiliative societies were driven, as Collini says of Herbert Butterfield, by ‘ambition, duty, and anxiety’ (p. 145). Herbert Hart, educated at Bradford Grammar School and New College, Oxford, after practicing as a barrister in London, became Professor of Jurisprudence at Oxford, Principal of Brasenose College, and a leader of a group pursuing plain-language philosophy. Though tolerant of the tests put to his marriage by ‘the sexual bohemianism of his energetic and colourful wife’, his life was ‘wracked by anxiety, depression, and inner conflict’ (pp. 287, 292). After a Cornish childhood, A. L. Rowse passed through the highly competitive educational system to a first in history at Christ Church and thence on to an All Souls fellowship and found himself ‘living what he described as “this university cum writing cum margin-of-politics life”’ (p. 110). From a radical youth, Rowse, in old-age, astonishingly, came to admire Margaret Thatcher as a 20th-century Good Queen Bess. Though he had admirers in the United States, making frequent visits to the Huntington Library in California, he had more than his share of disappointments. He lost the Wardenship election of All Souls in 1952 to John Sparrow. (In a poem Rowse referred to Sparrow’s charm as ‘intermittent’.(24)) Honours came to him, but late and the wrong ones. Ill, aged, and embittered, Rowse became a Companion of Honour but he was not appointed to the Order of Merit. He always felt that Veronica Wedgwood held the place which was rightfully his. He was highly insulted when the Prince of Wales visited him to congratulate him on being appointed to the Companion of Honour and referred to him as ‘Professor’.(25)

In addition to its wit and acuity, Collini’s brisk trot through the literary careers of the 20th-century intelligentsia opens rather than closes important research questions. The figures he discusses were the priests of modernity and as such they explored modernity’s ironies. In seeking cultural authority and in attempting to find universal truths they discovered local ones. In pursuit of dominance they discovered decline.(26) In seeking control they experienced loss. In finding intellectual patterns, they dissolved them. Collini’s book opens these and other issues. We can look forward to his and others’ research to explore them.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

Notes

1. Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford, 2006). About which see W. C. Lubenow, “‘We have such a class and they are known as p-p-p-prigs’”: the anxieties of intellectuals,’ [Review Essay], *Minerva*, 45 (2007), 459–74.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. W. H. Auden’s remark is in a letter to Cyril Connolly which Collini quotes (p. 9).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Harold Nicolson Diary, 13 January 1940, printed in Harold Nicolson, *The War Years, 1939–1945: Volume 11 of Diaries and Letters*, ed. Nigel Nicolson, (New York, 1967), p. 57.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850–1930* (Oxford, 1991).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. For a decidedly untiresome treatment of such themes see Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge: From Gutenberg to Diderot* (Cambridge, 2000) and, to take the story into more recent times Burke, ‘A social history of knowledge revisited’, *Modern Intellectual History*, 4, 3 (2007), 526–34.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA., 1991 [1995]).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore and London, 2003), pp. 129, 294 n. 41.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Keith Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography: The Oxford DNB in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 20–1.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. David Amigoni, ‘Life histories and the cultural politics of historical knowing: the *Dictionary of National Biography* and the late nineteenth-century political field’, in *Life and Work History Analyses: Qualitative and Quantitative Developments*, ed. Shirley Dix (London and New York, 1991), pp. 144–66, esp. 145–6; David Amigoni, *Victorian Biography: Intellectuals and the Ordering of Discourse* (New York, 1993), pp. 10–12, 14, 21, 180 n. 27.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Or so H. C. G. Matthew told Keith Thomas. See Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography*

- , p. 16. The quotation is from H. C. G. Matthew, *Leslie Stephen and the New Dictionary of National Biography* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 13.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Matthew, *Leslie Stephen and the New Dictionary of National Biography*, pp. 15, 36. ‘Madame’ d’Eon visited Oxford in 1796 and dined with The Club as an honorary member. Falconer Madan, *Records of The Club of Oxford, 1790–1917* (Oxford, 1917), p. 59.[Back to \(11\)](#)
 12. *From Max Weber: Essays on Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York, 1946), p. 155. (The emphasis is mine.)[Back to \(12\)](#)
 13. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* trans. L. Wirth and E. Shils, (New York, 1938), p. 155. [Back to \(13\)](#)
 14. Jesse Stewart, *Jane Ellen Harrison: A Portrait in Letters* (London, 1959), p. 83. Alas, this statement does not appear in Murray’s letter to Stewart where he deploys the phrase ‘looking for the light our elders had not seen’ and other phrases she quotes. Stewart must have garbled Murray’s letter when she transcribed it. It would have been better for my argument if she had not so garbled it, but she did. See Gilbert Murray to Jesse Stewart, 26 October 1953, Newnham College, Cambridge, Harrison Papers 5/1/2/45.[Back to \(14\)](#)
 15. Clive Bell, *Old Friends: Personal Recollections* (London, 1956), p. 130.[Back to \(15\)](#)
 16. Quoted in Philip Waller, *Writers, Readers, and Reputations: Literary Life in Britain, 1870–1918* (Oxford, 2006), p. 495.[Back to \(16\)](#)
 17. *The Savile Club, 1868–1923* (London, 1923), pp. 1, 8, 35.[Back to \(17\)](#)
 18. See, for example, Margo C. Finn, *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture. 1740–1914* (Cambridge, 2003).[Back to \(18\)](#)
 19. See Geoffrey Hosking, ‘Trust and distrust: a suitable question for historians?’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 16, (2006): 95–116.[Back to \(19\)](#)
 20. Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago and London, 1994); *The Scientific Life: A Moral History of a Late Modern Vocation* (Chicago and London, 2008).[Back to \(20\)](#)
 21. Stefan Collini, ‘My roles and their duties: Sidgwick as philosopher, professor and public moralist’, in *Henry Sidgwick*, ed. Ross Harrison (Oxford, 2001), pp. 7–49.[Back to \(21\)](#)
 22. Quoted in W. C. Lubenow, ‘Intimacy, imagination, and the inner dialectics of knowledge communities’, in *The Organization of Knowledge in Victorian Britain*, ed. Martin Daunt (Oxford, 2005), p. 369.[Back to \(22\)](#)
 23. Gilbert Murray, ‘German scholarship’, *Quarterly Review*, 223, 443 (April 1915), 330–339. The quotes are at 336 and 338.[Back to \(23\)](#)
 24. A. L. Rowse, *All Souls in My Time* (London, 1993), p. 199.[Back to \(24\)](#)
 25. I owe whatever I know about A. L. Rowse to discussions with Dr. Donald Adamson who is writing an appreciative account of Rowse’s life and career. [Back to \(25\)](#)
 26. See for example Stefan Collini, ‘Where did it all go wrong? Cultural critics of “modernity” in inter-war Britain’, in *The Strange Survival of Liberal England: Political Leaders, Moral Values and the Reception of Economic Decline*, ed. D. M. Tanner and E. H. H. Green (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 247–74. [Back to \(26\)](#)

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