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Reading Communities and the Circulation of Print

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Forgotten Books and Local Readers: Popular Fiction in the Library at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

Julieanne Lamond

This essay uses the records of local library borrowers' choices in the early twentieth century to approach a body of fiction that has been given many names: popular fiction, forgotten books, 'the great unread', victims of 'the slaughterhouse of literature'.[1] These definitions are not coextensive but my interest is in works that were once read (widely, or intensively in particular places and times) and are now largely unknown. These are important to literary history in part because they form, as Margaret Cohen argues, the constitutive context in which other, more visible, literary works were read and written, published and sold (*Sentimental*). They are also notoriously difficult to study – Glover and McCracken suggest that the critical histories of popular fiction 'are still in the process of being made' (5). The making of such histories requires that we direct our attention beyond the known to the unread books. I suggest that the best way to approach the great unread is to follow in the footsteps of those who did read these books, and to focus on the points where their paths met.

The essay follows the intersecting paths of readers at a small library in regional New South Wales in the first decade of the twentieth century. Their reading leads us to a cluster of works – Katherine Thurston's *The Gambler* (1904), Harold MacGrath's *The Man on the Box* (1904) and E. Phillips Oppenheim's *A Prince of Sinners* (1903) – which, taken together, enable us to read between the known, the lesser known and the great unread to point to a thematic preoccupation that appears to underlie much of the reading in this library and perhaps this period more broadly: risk. These reading patterns tell us about the history of literature in Australia – for example, the boom in

1 See, for example, Ken Gelder, *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Franco Moretti, 'The Slaughterhouse of Literature', *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 61.1 (2000) 207–27; Margaret Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999.

interest in American novels in the early years of the twentieth century and the role of libraries in the readership of ephemeral or popular fiction. They also tell us about Australian literature as it is more narrowly defined, providing the context for the reading of works by Guy Boothby and Miles Franklin, for example, as well as constituting the culture within – and perhaps against – which Australian authors were writing. This reading history complicates existing narratives of generically segmented readerships in this period.

One of the many odd metaphors that have been used to describe this body of fiction is that of works dwelling in the 'cellars of culture' (Moretti, interviewed by Parry). This is odd because we might think of cellaring as the opposite of the processes of popular culture: canonicity as a preservation process, during which the best works improve with age while the worst are consumed and then discarded. What Moretti meant, I suspect, was less a cellar than a dungeon, where works are locked away, waiting for the distant reader to save them. In looking at popular fiction from the past we are often looking at books which have not aged, in the sense that they have not been read by subsequent generations, nor have they been reinterpreted by academic critics long after they were written. They remain suspended in a web of relationships with other books and their readers, in a time and place, themselves related in complicated ways to broader networks of markets for books and periodicals, and movements in literary taste and fashion. These works should be approached as part of the set of relations they were embedded in – their intertextual relations with other works, as these are revealed by reading practices. The best place to discover these relationships is not the cellar, but the library. Library loan records preserve local and temporal intertextual relationships alongside more complicated market-like ones: what kinds of people were reading what kinds of books.

The library circulation records that have survived from this period in Australia (and, for the most part, in other national contexts) are all from regional libraries. When digitised and formed into databases, as is increasingly taking place,[2] these records constitute a powerful tool for navigating 'the great unread'. In examining such data I have taken an approach to 'the challenge of quality' (Moretti, *Atlas* 5) that is not so much distant as scalable, as has been suggested by digital humanities scholars such as Martin Wynne, Glenn Roe, and Seth Denbo and Neil Fraistat. They argue that computer-enabled approaches to large corpuses of literary data should move between the general and the particular, so as to understand both broad patterns and their constituent parts. Such an approach not to text corpuses but to circulation data

2 See the work of the members of the AHRC-funded Community Libraries network: for example, Katie Halsey's on the Innerpeffray Library in Scotland, Christopher Phillips's on the Easton Library Company Database, and more established projects such as 'What Middletown Read' (http://www.bsu.edu/libraries/wmr/) and Dissenting Academies Online (http://vls.english.qmul.ac.uk/).

reveals how books moved in space and time. These findings in turn can be used to identify 'lost' works, reframing our understanding of the field as a whole.

The readers whose paths I am following here were subscribers to the Lambton Mechanics' and Miners' Institute between 1903 and 1912. Patrons included men and women of various occupations including miners, tradespeople, politicians and manual labourers.[3] The records of their borrowing are available, along with those of six other regional Australian libraries, in the Australian Common Reader database.[4] Such records provide an exploratory tool, rather than a representative sample of broader reading habits. It is not possible to generalise from several thousand regional Australian readers to the literary field as a whole, in part because libraries only ever constitute part of the market for books and library borrowing is one form of fiction circulation in this period, alongside serialisation, novelettes, and of course retail book trade. Accordingly we need to be specific about the nature of library borrowing and its position in the wider field of print culture. And some of Lambton's extensive reading is an example of not just books but cultures of reading that travel. Many of Lambton's borrowers were Welsh immigrants bringing more to Australia than their mining skills: they also brought strong cultural norms surrounding reading, self-education and autodidacticism (see Baggs; Lamond, 'Zones').

Borrowing from circulating and subscription libraries in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, especially in Australia, was a form of participation in mass markets for books. These institutions, which survived much longer in Australia than in the UK and the US, participated in book markets both as block-buying institutional purchasers and in responding to the interests of their patrons. Thus the analysis of library borrowing records can in fact tell us something about the workings of the market for fiction in this period. Like many such institutes Lambton had standing orders with booksellers at various points, most notably with the Bookstall Publishing Co – the company perhaps more interested in developing Australian mass markets for fiction than any other (Nile and Walker 238).[5] Books were sent on approval and subsequently agreed upon by the library management committee. Book purchases were also influenced by individual library patrons and more strongly by committee members. At various points the library kept a 'proposition book' in which patrons could note suggestions for library purchases. Matthew Charlton MP, later fifth leader of the Australian

3 See Lamond, 'Zones' for more detail about the demographics and circumstances of Lambton borrowers.

4 http://www.australiancommonreader.com

5 The Lambton Institute had an agreement with Bookstall from at least 1899, according to its Committee Meeting Minutes in 1899 and 1900 (Lambton Mechanics' and Miners' Institute Archives, University of Newcastle Library, B10310–10314.)

Labor Party, used this book to suggest MacGrath's *A Splendid Hazard* (1910) alongside boys' adventures by Edward Ellis, a shipwreck romance by Arthur Hornblow, and one of Baroness Orczy's detective stories.[6]

As Charlton's suggestions indicate, the books most often read in libraries were not the cheapest works, nor necessarily the most expensive, but those in between: 'general reading', the 'latest novels' whose ephemerality was explicitly acknowledged in the press as well as within these works themselves. Early in MacGrath's *Man on the Box*, for example, our narrator notes:

> I do not recollect the popular novel of that summer, but at any rate it lay flapping at the side of his chair, forgotten. It never entered my hero's mind that […] this same author, even at this very moment, might be seated on the veranda of his beautiful summer villa, figuring out royalties on the back of stray envelopes (13).

The 'popular novel' is presented here as a category that lasts for a season and then is forgotten. This is the nature of popularity within libraries in the Australian Common Reader database, which shows significant changes in the popularity of authors and titles each year.

While every period of literary history can boast works of fiction that have since disappeared from sight, the borrowers at Lambton were participating in what Waller describes as 'the first and *only* mass literary age' (3, emphasis his): between the emergence of mass markets for fiction in the late nineteenth century and that of the radio and cinema as major modes of popular entertainment in the first half of the twentieth. While Waller describes this as a 'mass reading public', subsequent accounts have described the ways in which this period produced 'not a single, "mass" readership, as is often asserted, but new markets "divided and subdivided" into specialized groups' (Bloom 10, qtd in Carter 87). Glover and McCracken note 'there is relatively little known about the nuances of the different receptions of popular fictions' (6). We do know that these genres of popular fiction, especially detective and spy fiction, took specific and solidified form in this period but I am not sure that we know how discrete the readerships were for these emerging genres. Kemp and Mitchell suggest that it is 'generic promiscuity, rather than specialization, which characterizes the career of many bestselling writers' in the Edwardian period (xvii), raising the question, were readers of this period also 'generically promiscuous'?

Scalable approaches to readership of popular fiction complicate accounts of segmenting readerships at the turn of the twentieth century. Evidence from small-town American readers in Muncie, Indiana, in the last decade of the nineteenth century suggests readerships clustered around

6 Lambton Mechanics' and Miners' Institute Committee Meeting Minutes, November 1910. Lambton Mechanics' and Miners' Institute Archives, University of Newcastle Library, B10310–10314.

particular genres: specifically, forms of romance (Tatlock). But regional Australian readers in the period immediately succeeding the Muncie records were much more diverse in their borrowing habits. Unlike their American counterparts, these regional Australian borrowers read extensively, mostly recent fiction, and there is very little evidence of their common reading being clustered around specific genres. There are, however, patterns of common reading clustered around groups of books that do not appear to share generic characteristics. These are works that do not fit neatly into generic categories that a distant reader might use to describe works en masse – and that are customarily used as critical tools with which to think about the mass market fiction emerging in this period.

Digitised circulation records can be interpreted using cluster and network analysis, techniques used to identify patterns in complex social or market structures (see Schaeffer; Easley and Kleinberg). Such analysis of the Lambton records reveals a high degree of common reading among patrons; their reading is not segmented along genre or demographic lines but rather densely interconnected (Lamond, 'Squinting'; 'Zones'). This tells us that there was a strong potential for literary sociability in Lambton: if two library patrons met at one of the town's several pubs or (more likely) at a meeting of one of its many friendly societies, there is a strong chance that they had read many books in common. These channels of potential sociability were, for the most part, formed by very different kinds of books than those which were usually the focus of formal book societies and discussion groups in this period (see for example Webby). These were recent works, some of which we can categorise generically: thrillers by E. Phillips Oppenheim and William Tufnell Le Queux, religious adventure-romances by Joseph and Silas Hocking, Welsh romances by Allen Raine, sporting fictions by Nat Gould and, declining over the period, romances by Rosa Carey and Annie Swan. The bulk of the reading, however, was of what Cohen describes as 'forgotten books'. In fact, they were books whose 'evanescent' popularity was acknowledged before they had time to be forgotten. 'J.G.', a bookseller writing for the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1905, describes most of his clients' purchases as tales 'destined to a not very distant oblivion'.[7]

The three books that borrowers at Lambton most often read in common with one another were E. Philips Oppenheim's *A Prince of Sinners* (1903), Katherine Thurston's *The Gambler* (1904) and Harold MacGrath's *Man on the Box* (1904).[8] These titles constitute a node of local and temporal

7 'J.G.' 'What People Are Reading: An American Novel Boom.' *Sydney Morning Herald* 4 Feb. 1905: 9.

8 This was identified using a visualisation of borrowing data at Lambton which represents the similarity between patrons based on the books they had borrowed in common, created by Mark Reid at ANU and discussed in more detail in Lamond and Reid (2008).

intertextuality: they were read, together, by readers in Lambton, NSW, mostly in 1906. However, the concurrent popularity of at least two of these works was not limited to Lambton, nor to Australia, nor to regional readers. They were popular amongst metropolitan American readers in the previous year. In December 1905 *The Gambler* was listed as one of the most popular works of fiction loaned in the New York, Chicago and Boston public libraries.[9] *The Gambler* was listed as the best-selling title in New York bookshops that week; *The Man on the Box* was fifth on the list.[10] Oppenheim was to become popular in America almost a decade later, not entering the bestseller lists until 1918 (Korda 30). Concordance between common reading practices in regional NSW and best-seller and most-borrowed lists in metropolitan American cities in the same period draws our attention to the contemporaneity of these Australians' reading and to the pace at which literary popularity travelled in the case of works which had fairly short shelf lives. The fact that Lambton's reading follows that of Chicago, Boston and New York (and, in the case of Oppenheim, precedes it) challenges assumptions about cultural isolation or belatedness in regional reading practices when compared with metropolitan ones.

Taken together, Oppenheim, Thurston and MacGrath point to differences between works and authors that might usually be classified collectively as 'popular'. Of the three, Oppenheim most clearly qualifies for 'socially canonical' status in Moretti's sense, in part because of the extent of the popularity of his glamorous thrillers about international diplomacy and the secret service. Unlike MacGrath and Thurston, Oppenheim's novels were consistently popular at Lambton over this period, as they were in other regional Australian libraries.[11] His social canonicity – and visibility to at least that corner of literary history that considers popular fiction – might also result from the clear generic status of much of his output. He was among the earliest authors of the spy thriller, a genre that endured over the intervening century.

Thurston and MacGrath, on the other hand, do not fall neatly into the history of any particular popular novelistic genre, their careers were shorter, and their popularity earlier and more short-lived. From Oppenheim to Thurston we take a step towards, if not quite into, the forgotten books. Katherine Cecil Thurston was known in her time as a best-selling writer, especially in the US. In 1905 she was in the unusual position of having two novels on the US bestseller list: her political thriller *The Masquerader* (published in the UK as *John Chilcote, M.P.*) at number six, *The Gambler* at number seven, with Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* at number eight (Korda 10). As is often the case with popular writers, the focus of her readers

9 'Books People Are Reading.' *New York Tribune* 4 December 1905.

10 'What N.Y. Booksellers Say They Are Selling Most.' *New York Tribune* 4 Dec. 1905.

11 Oppenheim was the most loaned author at Lambton, the third most loaned at Collie and Rosedale, and sixth at Maitland (http://australiancommonreader.com).

at the time and of scholarly readers since has been quite different. Although these early novels marked the height of Thurston's popularity, subsequent critical attention has focused on her later work to define her place within a small body of Irish New Woman writers. Geraldine Meaney describes her as a 'decadent, sensational and successful' example of Irish writers' influence on the development of New Woman fiction in this period (158), although this notoriety occurred several years after the publication of the novels read at Lambton.[12] This critical focus can, however, help us to read *The Gambler* (1905), a sensational novel about a young Irishwoman who succumbs to a hereditary gambling addiction when she travels from Ireland to Venice, as I will discuss further below.

Harold MacGrath's *The Man on the Box* (1904) is a forgotten book, as far as literary scholarship goes. A comic/sentimental novel involving an extended adventure of class impersonation and romance, it is a good exemplar of 'the bright and breezy American novel'[13] that was popular in Australia in the first five or so years of the twentieth century. MacGrath 'found the limelight' (Bobbs-Merrill 16) with best-selling adventure and romance novels and also with his involvement with the cinema: several of his novels, including *Man on the Box*, were adapted into films and he subsequently wrote both screenplays and 'novelisations'.

In approaching these novels through their intertextual relationships I am undertaking a form of 'surface reading': focusing on what is 'evident, perceptible, apprehensible' (Best and Marcus 9) in the text, as it might have been to its readers in the period. This is, as Best and Marcus put it, essentially a descriptive reading practice which seeks patterns and connections between works of fiction. Margaret Cohen notes that reading 'the great unread' still requires 'the critical act of perceptive reading', even of texts that might not 'signify in fashions that are meaningful using the criteria of close, formal analysis' ('Narratology' 59). Such a reading of Thurston's and MacGrath's novels points to a thematic preoccupation sitting quite close to the surface that might not be apparent to more distant – or closer – modes of reading: risk.

These novels would both seem to conform to another, more widely-assumed feature of popular fiction in this period, and that is travel. Carter notes the 'sheer mobility' of such popular fiction, not only in terms of its circulation but also its plots, especially crime and mystery novels 'with many plots turning on rail, ship or air travel' (89). Both *The Gambler* and *The Man*

12 Thurston's divorce from writer E. Temple Thurston was covered extensively in the press, and was notorious because of its airing of the conflicts between 'the claims of decadent art and those of the New Woman' (Meaney 169). Her final novel, *Max* (1910), has attracted critical attention for its representation of gender performance and cross-dressing.

13 'What People Are Reading: An American Novel Boom.' *Sydney Morning Herald* 4 Feb 1905: 9.

on the Box foreground the act and implications of travel. The latter opens by asking its reader to 'calculate the distance between that enchanting Paris of France and the third-precinct police-station of Washington, D.C., which is not enchanting' (1). It goes on to detail its protagonist's various problems with visas, hotel rooms, local currency and the pressing question of where to live and what to do with his life after returning from an extended period abroad. His travel has been driven by a desire for novelty and adventure. When leaving his army post, he says,

> I want to see at least five thousand dollars worth of new scenery before I shuffle off this mortal coil. The scenery around here palls on me […] Besides, Colonel, I have been reading Treasure Island again, and I've got the fever in my veins to hunt for adventure. (11)

Paying attention here to 'what the text says about itself' (Best and Marcus 11), MacGrath's novel is jokingly aware of its role as satisfying readers' desire for adventure, especially through travel. *The Gambler* opens with what sounds to be narrative of adventure, even perhaps a Gothic one: an Englishman travels to a place marked by bewildering cultural difference (in this case, rural Ireland) but upon his marriage the focalisation shifts to his wife, Clodagh, and her travels from her home to London and then the glittering (but corrupting) society of Venice and Paris. It is here that 'just reading' these novels can complicate and enrich generalisations about the field, because it reveals that this travel is tied to a broader – and more interesting – thematic of risk.

The most evident similarity between Thurston's and MacGrath's novels is that both revolve around a young woman who is left without a living or inheritance as a result of her father's gambling. In *The Gambler*, our heroine Clodagh is left destitute upon her father's death. She is rescued by marriage to an honourable but dour Englishman who takes her to Venice and then is too preoccupied with his academic work to notice that she is being seduced by the roulette wheel and the fast set who preside over it. Upon her husband's death she proceeds to gamble away his money, including that set aside for her sister upon her marriage. There ensues debt, morally dubious financial and sexual arrangements, subterfuge, a romance with a more worldly but also honourable man, and finally rescue from the brink of destruction by the kind sister. In MacGrath's novel, the secret alluded to throughout and revealed at its close is that the heroine's father – a well-respected retired Colonel – had succumbed to a hereditary gambling addiction ('the lust of his forebears') that has resulted in a debt so great he is willing to sell secrets of national security to a Russian spy in order to pay them off (213). Our hero (still disguised, now as a coachman) intervenes to prevent this transfer from taking place, saving England and then the object of his affections, marrying her to save her from the ignominy of having to make her living as a violinist.

Reading Thurston's novel in light of MacGrath's, we see a common thematic preoccupation. These are novels about money – gambling with it, losing it and, for women, marriage in order to survive a sudden risk of loss of financial and social status. They are interested in social mobility and its relation to literal mobility across the world. Both pathologise gambling as a hereditary illness and personal affliction, in the mode of the temperance novel, but also present it as a malaise with broader social implications. MacGrath acknowledges that gambling takes place beyond the casino and bridge table and also in financial markets: our poor Colonel 'began to mortgage the estates [and] dabbled in stocks; a sudden fall in gold, and he realized that his daughter was nearly penniless' (214). Thurston presents gambling as evidence of a modern, fashionable and dangerous preoccupation with novelty. The people she meets in Venice are amazed when she explains that she does not play cards:

> Serracauld's eyes were wide with astonishment.
>
> 'Really!—quite really!'
>
> 'Why you are ethereal, Mrs. Milbanke,' Barnard said laughingly, as the gondola glided up to the palace steps. 'The passport to humanity nowadays is an inordinate love of risk.' (205)

The love of risk was evident amongst readers of this period, which is implicitly acknowledged within these novels: in MacGrath's for example, a character 'could no more resist the call of intrigue than a gambler can resist the croupier's "Make your game, gentlemen!"' (222). The call of intrigue, the appeal of stories of risk-taking – whether moral, physical, financial, political, or all of these – characterised the reading tastes of the library patrons at Lambton as elsewhere in this period. Where MacGrath's novel is self-consciously involved in the market for stories of travel and intrigue, placing its gambling Colonel in the background of the narrative, Thurston's, working in a more sensational mode, questions the desire for risk by placing its protagonist in real financial, physical and moral danger and exposing the reader to a detailed exposition of its motivations and effects.

The Gambler is significant here for the gender of its eponymous risk-taker. Reading Thurston's novel in light of her later critical reputation as a New Woman novelist shifts our focus to the differences in the ways she and MacGrath treat a very similar story. In *The Man on the Box*, the marriage which saves our disinherited heroine from poverty is also a love match, and thus the novel presents a neat and conventional romantic ending. In *The Gambler*, the financial-bailout-via-marriage is presented as a terrible mistake – a *Middlemarch*-like marriage of a vital young woman to a hoary older academic. This portrait of a woman's economic dependence and unhappy marriage might begin to pave the way for Thurston's later career as a New Woman novelist. More

interesting, however, is its presentation of how Clodagh uses her financial independence upon her husband's death, succumbing to the pleasures of fast society and its gambling obsession. Much like *The House of Mirth*, which sat alongside it in the bestseller lists, *The Gambler* acknowledges that financial risk carries for women a concomitant moral risk. Clodagh borrows money from a man who has been trying to seduce her; her attempts to conceal this almost destroy her chance of happiness with the eventual hero and meanwhile lead her to the point of suicide. As one of the three books most likely to be read in common at Lambton, *The Gambler* suggests that when we make generalisations about travel, adventure and intrigue within popular fiction it is worth considering how these novels present not only the pleasures but also the perils of risk, and that these risks involve not only Russian spies but marriage and mortgages. They are at once exotic and mundane, foreign and domestic.

Libraries have been focal points in discussions about the moral dangers of popular fiction, as well as of 'the library habit of reading … a superficial, careless, nonappropriate skipping habit' (Pawley 60) since the late nineteenth century. Concerns around library reading were focused on mass market fiction and the non-intensive modes of reading it entailed. Sydney bookseller 'J.G.', writing in 1904, describes the lending library as 'a kind of book threshing or sorting machine, and the reading public its motive power. From the verdict given there is no appeal'.[14] The library in this account is a means of measuring and determining popularity in the market. The same article notes the boom in Sydney's circulating libraries, as

> Hundreds of gentlemen who in the past would have built up good solid libraries for their private use now content themselves in purchasing works of reference, and for their general reading subscribe to one or more of the principal circulating libraries, where the most expensive books, not to speak of scores of the latest novels, can always be found on the shelves.[15]

The 'general' nature of library reading, in addition to its extensiveness and rapid turnover, might explain why it seems to challenge the presumption of market segmentation according to genre in this period. It may well be that market segmentation occurs at the level of the cheaper fiction that was more likely to be purchased than borrowed. Nonetheless, these library records remind us of the continuing popularity of more generically amorphous works (such as Thurston's) in this period, and of the popularity of the many authors who wrote across genres.

Within this framework writers who are regarded very differently by literary critics – for example, in the Australian context, the canonical Miles

14 J.G., 'What People Read,' *Sydney Morning Herald* 13 Feb 1904: 4.

15 J.G., 'What People Read,' *Sydney Morning Herald* 13 Feb 1904: 4.

Franklin and much less canonical Guy Boothby – come into proximity to one another. Boothby was the single most popular author in any given year at Lambton. He was especially popular at Lambton from 1903–1906 and thus shared a significant readership with Thurston, MacGrath and Oppenheim. Viewed through the lens of our three texts we might include Boothby in these readers' interest in travel, thrilling adventure and sensational stories. He is, however, a little hard to categorise because he was so prolific and he wrote across several genres – detective stories, sensational thrillers, romances.

Such generic promiscuity can be occluded by – and can skew – the kinds of generalisations often made of reading or sales records. The gap between social canonicity at the time and scholarly canonicity since – such as we also see with Thurston's work – has important implications for the kinds of conclusions we might draw, especially from the popularity of writers on the edge of the 'great unread'. Boothby's works that have endured in histories of popular literature are his Dr Nikola series, but these were not the works that were heavily borrowed in Australian libraries (although the libraries held them). Instead, there was keen interest in his Australian romance/detective stories: *Connie Burt*, *The Childerbridge Mystery*, and the wonderfully titled *Sheilah McLeod: Heroine of the Back Blocks*. His detective/romance novels were also regularly borrowed: *A Queer Affair*, *A Consummate Scoundrel* – as were his exotic colonial mystery adventures: *The Beautiful White Devil*, *My Indian Queen* and *Prince of Swindlers*.

David Carter is right to emphasise Boothby's influence on the formation of an international popular fiction market in relation to the sensation/thriller genre, and the importance of his Australian-themed novels for establishing antipodean romance as a recognised variation of romance-adventure theme in international mass markets. However, focusing on how, and in what company, Boothby was read can also illuminate his relationship to more canonical writers such as Franklin. Boothby's Anglo-Australian romances were popular in Australia, as well as overseas, and read alongside Thurston, MacGrath, and Oppenheim. They bring the relationship between travel and risk closer to home, to readers who have, in the case of most of Lambton's patrons, themselves taken great (financial and personal) risks to migrate to Australia in search of work.

At the opening of her overview of Australian popular fiction, Toni Johnson-Woods cites Miles Franklin in a letter to Henry Lawson: 'Oh! How I hate the very sound of business & when one advises me on one side to write like Guy Boothby…' (1). Boothby, here, represents writing as 'business', (and Johnson-Woods's argument about the 'terminal literary disease, popularity', 1), but this letter also reminds us of the contemporaneity of Boothby to Franklin and a more recognisably Australian literary tradition. She may well have been advised to 'write like Guy Boothby' not just because he wrote

bestselling novels but because he was someone who could write novels *about Australia* that sold and thus, as Carter notes, helped to create a market for other Australian writers. Of the forty patrons in the Australian Common Reader who borrowed Franklin's novel, more than half of them also borrowed novels by Boothby. Several read *My Brilliant Career* alongside, or rather after, reading *Sheilah McLeod: Heroine of the Back Blocks*.[16] However much Franklin did not want to write like Guy Boothby, she may well have been read like him.

Literary history looks different when you follow the reader. Thurston and MacGrath form part of the 'constitutive context' for the reading – and writing – of Australians in the period following federation. Their awareness of their own position in an economy of transient novelty marks them as part of a body of fiction that might not be generically distinctive but certainly occupies a distinctive section of the literary market: that 'middling space' (Hall) between high and low cultural status that constitutes much library reading.[17] When approached by way of its readers, 'the great unread' of the early twentieth century begins to appear as a field marked by both generic promiscuity and generic indeterminacy, and by a self-conscious awareness of the world of market popularity and the desire for novelty and adventure both within the fiction itself and in the book talk that surrounded it. At Lambton, Boothby's books about travel to and from Australia were read in the context of MacGrath celebrating the relationship between travel and adventure, Franklin wondering where reading leads women's search for fulfilment, and Thurston questioning the desire for novelty, travel and excitement – indeed, the attraction of risk – that underpins so many of the novels that were read there.

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16 Of the forty patrons at the Port Germein Institute who borrowed *My Brilliant Career*, twenty-six also borrowed at least one novel by Boothby. Fourteen borrowed both *My Brilliant Career* and *Sheila McLeod*. Of these, seven read Boothby's novel first, four read them in the same year, and one read Franklin's novel first.

17 This 'middling space' is not necessarily that of the middlebrow. While Mechanics Institutes might be considered proto-middlebrow in their desire for reading to better their patrons, readers tended to resist this imperative. The works that I am classifying as 'general fiction', in their self-conscious 'lightness' and lack of seriousness, would be difficult to fit within the framework of the middlebrow.

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