Samuel Pepys and his Books: Reading, Newsgathering, and Sociability, 1660-1703

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Author: Kate Loveman
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Samuel Pepys is not a man who requires an introduction, but this new book by Kate Loveman provides a fresh look into Pepys’s social life, by pointing out how this was shaped and expanded by Pepys’s love for books. Kate Loveman has written extensively on Samuel Pepys and in this book she returns to this topic, using Pepys’s case as an entryway into the reading practices and sociability of educated Londoners.

The book follows a chronological structure, starting from the 1660s and the beginning of Pepys’s diary, but also his rise in the administration; it finishes at the beginning of the 18th century, detailing Pepys’s retirement, when he focused his energies on the expansion of his library. Nonetheless, this is not just another biography of Pepys: Loveman’s focus is reading and sociability and she examines firstly how Pepys’s changing status influenced his reading and collecting habits. Secondly, she investigates how Pepys’s interests and practices were shared by other elite readers, and formed the basis for sociable exchanges between them. In this way, Loveman provides a comprehensive picture of Pepys’s reading and information gathering, but also expands this analysis in order to examine other members of his social milieu.

The main axis of Loveman’s book is the interplay between reading and sociability. Through a painstaking analysis of printed and manuscript sources Loveman examines how reading and buying books fostered ties of sociability between members of the elite. The book begins with an analysis of the patterns of reading, and emphasises that texts were highly mobile and accessible: they were carried around, to be read aloud in company or silently, while walking, and they were shown to friends and acquaintances, providing a talking point. Loveman stresses that even those who did not buy books were not excluded from reading. Texts could be encountered in various places, such as news books and newsletters in barber shops and coffee shops, adverts and playbills on posts, prints and ballads in alehouses, and notices in the Exchange. These texts were found in spaces where people congregated, providing opportunities for discussion and sociability.

Reading, and the sociability it facilitated, Loveman argues, could also be employed for self-advancement. The textual analysis learned at universities, which emphasised highlighting and memorising remarkable passages, provided individuals with the ability to make the most out of reading in a variety of contexts. Loveman examines how Pepys’s love for philosophy helped him create bonds with other educated men,
many of whom were his superiors in administration, who shared his passion, or how his reading of books on mathematics assisted him in showing zeal and competence as a naval official. Furthermore, Pepys’s reading of conduct literature and his ability to recite memorable passages were utilised in discussions in coffee-houses and other gathering places in order to strengthen his arguments and gain the upper hand in debates. Here, Pepys’s case qualifies Pincus’s view that coffee-house discussion was equal and informal. Loveman shows that reading was useful not only for cultivating Pepys’s intellect, but also helping him get ahead by enhancing his reputation as an educated man and a zealous employee.

Interestingly, Pepys could also promote himself by having access to a variety of news networks. These allowed him to keep abreast of developments and, as a consequence, provide his superiors with valuable information about the mood of the city. Loveman emphasises how in examining news gathering we need to think about the interconnectedness of different media; print, manuscript, and oral. Loveman employs social network theories, showing how Pepys cultivated contacts with access to different networks in order to gain a clear picture of the temperature of the city. Pepys’s efficient networking did more than assuage his curiosity; his superiors turned to him when they wanted to learn how Londoners viewed them, and to ask for advice on how to improve their reputation.

Loveman also examines two kinds of texts that more clearly influenced sociability, histories and books of pleasure. Loveman explores how the Civil Wars made readers far more sceptical of the claims of histories. Attempts to swing public opinion to a partisan viewpoint through the publication of histories made a part of the reading public particularly cynical and jaded about the truthfulness of this kind of writing. Nevertheless, this scepticism did not stop readers from enjoying such books. On the contrary, Loveman argues that sometimes it was exactly this bias, obvious to the discerning reader, which made history reading a pleasant sociable activity. Using Pepys’s diary, Loveman shows how Pepys and his wife read lives of famous persons against rumours they had heard; this suggests that even a text maligned for its inaccuracies could offer an opportunity for pleasurable communal reading.

This point is reiterated in Loveman’s chapter on ‘Books of pleasure’, which examines plays, romances, and novels. Loveman suggests that novels and romances were intentionally written in episodic form, in order to make the practice of memorising passages easier and thus to facilitate recitation in company. Loveman also highlights the fact that even while watching a play, reading could enable participation in sociable discourse: readers who had read background material could discuss a play and its sources, thus distinguishing themselves in polite conversation.

The second part of Loveman’s book moves from reading to books, and focuses more on buying and collecting and how these activities provided opportunities for sociable relations. This is done impressively in the chapter on purchasing books, where Loveman reconstructs the process of buying books and investigates the methods used by booksellers to market their wares to customers. Pepys’s case shows that customers often had a favourite bookseller, depending on their specialisation. This familiarity between bookseller and customer made it easier for the former to appeal to the client’s interests. They did so by advertising the passages they expected would be of interest to the buyer, emphasising the scarcity of copies or the reputation of the author. However, even Londoners did not limit themselves to purchasing books in the metropolis, but had international contacts, people they corresponded with and also used to procure books. In this way, there was an ‘international community of obligation that assisted scholarship and collecting’ (p. 192).
This leads Loveman to a broader point about scholarly and international networks which functioned as gift-giving systems, where members exchanged books, gifts or services. Here Loveman goes beyond the ‘republic of letters’, by showing that many of those involved in these networks were not scholars, while women could also be included. These networks provided an alternative to purchasing books from booksellers, but also created bonds of (mutual, but not necessarily equal) obligation. For example, the informal circulation of manuscripts through these networks could be used as a way to honour the recipient in the hopes of reciprocation, or as a way to put forward new ideas and have them reach the right ears informally.

Loveman uses a case-study to highlight both how manuscript circulation could explore controversial issues, but also how it could be used strategically, to test public opinion. In order to do so, Loveman focuses on ‘Notes from Discourses touching Religion’, a manuscript that she persuasively attributes to Pepys. This was written in response to James II’s religious policies, as a way for Pepys to establish his own viewpoint. Loveman argues that this text was not meant for publication, but it is difficult to know for sure, since it was preserved in his papers (albeit the ones headed ‘General Mixt Papers, to be review’d’). Loveman here reads the ‘Notes’ against Pepys’s favourite readings on religion (such as Richard Simon, Francis Osborne, Samuel Parker and Thomas Hobbes) and the notes in his diary in order to explore how his scepticism on religious matters grew and how this justified his reaction to James II’s regime. Furthermore, and equally importantly, Loveman shows that controlled manuscript circulation was used by James II in order to test the waters as to how far his policies could be accepted.

In the last chapter on libraries and closets, Loveman acknowledges the common assumption in the period that a library or closet was a reflection of its owner, and investigates how owners (male or female) shaped their self-reflection by changing their library. Pepys was fully aware of this potential, and the difference between reading and collecting. Consequently, he paid attention to the design of his library, equipping it with books and optical and mathematical devices which advertised his learning. Collecting was another way to foster ‘select sociability’, since invitations to view one’s collection could reinforce social ties and oblige the visitor to reciprocate with a gift; this Loveman terms ‘book hospitality’. Pepys was fully aware of the importance of his book collection, which he viewed as his legacy.

One of the main strengths of Loveman’s book is the great variety of primary sources employed. Loveman focuses on Pepys’s diary, but also makes extensive use of his correspondence and other papers from his records. Additionally, she has conducted comprehensive research on the texts read by Pepys, which helps her to suggest the ways in which these readings shaped Pepys’s thought or how these texts could be usefully employed by Pepys in his effort to increase his cultural capital. This is not a book primarily about print culture, however. Loveman argues consistently that focusing exclusively on print blinds scholars to the various ways of information gathering available to Pepys and his circle. Rumours and word of mouth provided Londoners with news on politics or personal stories, which then could be corroborated or refuted by printed accounts – such as newsbooks or lives of well-known individuals. Manuscript circulation, on the other hand, could be used to exchange information or to test a new or controversial idea, such as new scientific theories or (in the case of James II) a debated religious policy. Thus, Loveman works extensively with manuscript sources such as Pepys’s above-mentioned papers but also the correspondence of elite Londoners to identify instances of manuscript and oral circulation of information.

Loveman’s work is a valuable contribution to the history of reading. In similar ways to Grafton, Jardine, and Sherman, the book employs the case study of a reader (Pepys) in order to draw broader conclusions about reading, information gathering and sociability. One issue with this method is whether Pepys is characteristic of 17th-century readers. Loveman acknowledges that Pepys is in many ways unique in both his extensive networks of contacts and in his extensive personal papers. For this reason, Loveman complements her research by examining other individuals of a similar social status. However, Pepys’s prolific life-writing provides a powerful framework and it is tempting to accept his case as normal.
Loveman identifies developments in reading practices, occasionally challenging previous historiography on this topic. For example, she argues against the concept of a ‘reading revolution’ in the 18th century, the idea that before 1750 readers practised ‘intensive reading’, reading few books very carefully. After this date, the argument goes, ‘extensive reading’ – reading many books but focusing less on them – was more common. Loveman shows that casual, extensive reading was commonplace because people came into regular contact with books in various contexts: in the streets, in gathering places, in company. Even if extensive reading is less likely to be recorded, Loveman presents various encounters with texts which do not conform to the idea of solitary, studious reading.

Another interesting contribution to the history of reading made by this book comes through Loveman’s emphasis on female reading and collecting, and how these activities could provide a sense of agency for women. Loveman shows that Elizabeth Pepys employed her reading in a similar way to Samuel, even if this happened in a domestic context. Elizabeth could increase her cultural capital by identifying passages from romances used in plays, or could use her reading of Arcadia tactically, in order to win an argument against her husband. Equally importantly, collecting and owning a personal closet or library could provide women with a space they could control. Loveman emphasises how women collectors exhibited great care in organising their closets and could navigate sociable occasions on more equal terms because of their collections.

A third major contribution of Loveman’s book to the literature on reading is her insistence on the blurring of the line between authors and readers. As Loveman shows, many readers approached reading as a model for their own writing. Pepys, for example, wanted to write a history of the Navy and he read avidly histories searching for ideas on how to perform such a task. Even though his ambition did not materialise, he wrote a shorter piece, titled ‘Memoires Relating to the State of the Royal Navy’ (1690). In this he was not alone, as many members of his social milieu (Thomas Fuller, John Evelyn, and William Petty) did the same. However, it was manuscript circulation which more easily transformed readers to writers. Loveman shows how authors circulated manuscripts in order to explore ideas, inviting participation and comment from their select readers. Manuscripts presented to a few readers were according to Loveman ‘provisionally complete’ (p. 216), since their readers were expected to comment on them, and propose revisions or additions.

Even though Loveman’s book is a very interesting example of the history of reading, based on a wide range of primary sources, it lacks a clear statement as to how it contributes to existing scholarship. This is partly because there is little emphasis on secondary reading. Even though Loveman shows an awareness of various trends in the history of reading, few secondary sources used to indicate engagement with the historiography on the subject. Loveman probably made a conscious choice to focus on archival material, which is definitely impressive, but it means the originality of this work is not highlighted as it might be.

This is an intelligent account of the ways in which book reading and collecting encouraged and cultivated sociability, and offers new insights into the history of reading. Employing wide-ranging research, Loveman manages to present a comprehensive picture of the elite’s reading practices. This is also a well-written and clearly presented work, two qualities which often do not receive the praise they deserve. Loveman’s account is clear and persuasive throughout; her combination of a chronological with a thematic structure and her excellent provision of conclusions in each chapter drive home her main points. Her insistence that the practices of the print trade should be studied alongside manuscript circulation is a very useful reminder for scholars working in this field. This is a book that will be of great interest to anyone working on the history of reading.

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