

Defining A Nation of Readers: Late Nineteenth Century Reading Guides
As Agents of Literary Nationalism in America

by
Alyson Raphael

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Abstract

In the decades succeeding the American Civil War, an influx of print, compounded by a rising demand for books and literacy, resulted in a huge increase of printed reading guides in America. Engaging in modern discourse on the history of reading and of literary nationalism in the late nineteenth century, my research attempts to bring these largely understudied late nineteenth century reading guides to light by exploring their expansion in America in relation to the era's public pursuit of a national literary identity.

In their advising role, as arbitrators of literary merit and moral persecutors of sensational mass literature, these reading guides attempted to set new criteria for a community-wide reading identity, one which would both reflect the Victorian-cultural morals of the era as well as increasingly help to define national literary standards of "best books." However, even as such guides attempted to establish a unified ideal of "American" literature and reading practices, their conflicting advice and variable public of readers often underscored the fragmented and inaccessible nature of their pursuit.

After a brief introduction of themes, the first chapter of my thesis provides background, establishing the context and history of reading guides in relation to the historical framework of late nineteenth century America. Chapter two extends the implications of reading guides by using them to complicate views of literary identity formation in the era. Exploring the ways in which literary identity is both created out of likeminded communities of readers, and simultaneously challenged by the differing literary expectations of those readers, I bring nineteenth century guides into the conversation as means of exposing both the ideals of and hindrances to the era's pursuit of literary nationalism. In chapters three and four these concepts are then applied to the analysis of two specific nineteenth century reading guides: J.A. Spencer's adaptation of James Pycroft's *Course of English Reading*, and Frank Parsons' first and second editions of *The World's Best Books: a Key to the Treasures of Literature*. Finally, the epilogue looks ahead at how contemporary reading guides can be seen to relate to their nineteenth century precedents, in order to establish topics of further research.

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Introduction

In 1875, a new public library opened its doors in the small town of Muncie, Indiana. Over the next twenty years, the town would witness a growth of industry, and a population that would expand nearly sevenfold, from just over 3,000 to over 20,000 residents by the turn of the century. The number of books in the town would simultaneously swell, such that by 1899, the Muncie public library would contain 4,702 books, and serve over 4,000 local patrons¹.

Today Muncie's public library records from the late nineteenth century are among the best-preserved and documented records available of the era's everyday reading practices, informing modern scholars about not only the number of books and patrons present in Muncie, but who those patrons were, what they were reading, and in this way, how they were responding to prescribed and proscribed reading practices in the era. We can know, for example, that among Muncie's register patron number 4056 was a certain Oscar Black, an iron miller born in 1871. A blue-collar worker, as many in the industrial town, Oscar nevertheless found time to visit the public library, with records indicating that he checked out 53 books between the years 1894 and 1901. More remarkable are the books Oscar was interested in, and presumably read. This iron miller, working at a boiler plant in the middle of rural America, checked out works by Dickens, Longfellow, Shakespeare, Hugo, and Emerson. While literary, he also appears to have enjoyed reading about the sciences and new technologies. He checked out the *Popular Science Monthly* and *Scribner's Magazine*; he learned about the life of Sir Isaac Newton, and was interested in photography as well as books on travel. He even took out a book entitled *Our Presidents, and How We Make Them*, showing an interest in politics; and most important to this research, on

¹ See the "What Middletown Read" online database for detailed records of the Muncie public library.

January 7, 1899, Oscar checked out a reading guide by Hamilton Wright Mabie entitled *Books and Culture*.

Oscar is perhaps an exception to the norm, as a blue-collar worker with an extensive repertoire of what could be considered refined reading selections. But, after all, what counts as refined reading? While Oscar's wide categories of interests could be seen to represent a general polymath ideal for Victorian readers to be well read in multiple subjects, the very distinction of which subjects or books are "better" than others points deeper to the inherent value judgments constantly made and negotiated in regards to choices of literature and reading practices. Oscar's reading list therefore helps to speak to the importance placed on reading selection in the late nineteenth century while mirroring societal ambitions in the era in terms of what was being approved as what should and increasingly could be read. In gaining access to more books than ever before, everyday citizens of Muncie, like Oscar, were not only reading to a greater extent, but were also carefully considering their book selections, often with the help of reading guides like Mabie's *Books and Culture*.

This small town of Muncie, Indiana, dubbed "Middletown" America by sociologists in the 1920s, has since been studied as a representation of the quintessential American city; and indeed throughout the nation in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the developments seen in Muncie, particularly concerning the growing availability of libraries, and more importantly of books, were simultaneously occurring throughout the nation. My purpose is not to question this trend toward an increasingly literate and reading American public, so much as to explore the

American response to this seeming textual-overload in the late nineteenth century. In particular, I will examine the era's trend toward the publishing and consulting of reading guides. As of yet, these guides have remained relatively obscure in modern research. However, they present a unique opportunity for understanding past reading practices, and contribute to dialogues on the history of reading. By prescribing acceptable books and reading practices for the American public, reading guides such as Mabie's guide to *Books and Culture* (as checked out by Oscar) increasingly helped readers to navigate the mass of printed information newly available in the era, while they also began to define new standards of reading for the nation. Therefore, by exploring reading guides for how they were understood and adapted by both American readers and guide authors in the late nineteenth century, I hope to appraise how such guides contributed toward the American public's definition of itself as a community of readers, and thus toward a growing conception of the nation's distinctive literary identity.

Reading guides, as I shall define them, comprised guidebooks of suggested readings, best-books lists, library selection manuals, conduct-of-life handbooks as they related to reading, lists of prohibited books, and other directional texts that aimed to advise nineteenth century readers in their choices of books. Though diverse by nature (and I hesitate even to define them as a genre), the similar prescriptions and restrictions on reading these various types of guides employ demand their collective study. Such guides often possessed easily identifiable titles such as *A Suggestive Course in Supplementary Reading and Literature*, or *The Best Reading: Hints on the Selection of Books, on the Formation of Libraries, Public and Private, on Courses of*

*Reading, Etc.*². Most, as these titles suggest, notably employed exclusionary methods of defining “good” vs. “bad” books so as to advise general readers in what to read, how to read, and/or why to read.

While there were easily as many as one hundred or more distinct reading guides in print (often as small, hardbound books) by the turn of the century, such guides were also duplicated and reprinted with varying editions and changing content. In effect, reading guides thereby only added to the mass-overload of print that they sought to direct. However, we must avoid overgeneralizing about these guides as a single consistent collection. Though all nineteenth century reading guides were commonly concerned with issues of book selection, the sheer quantity and differing purposes of these guides in the era could lead to their ranging in as diverse subjects as, for example, from what books are best to start a small library to what books make the best holiday gifts³. Further, my hesitation to provide an exact number of reading guides in the era serves to highlight the lack of academic scholarship that has been done on these texts. It is not hard to see why: these easily overlooked and seemingly superfluous small guides are suggestive of reproducible handbooks in their ostensible lack of literary merit. They are often reminiscent of book lists or magazine advice today, equally under-studied textual materials; and yet it is precisely such connections to modern understandings of reading selection and advice that I find most fascinating about these nineteenth century guides.

² See the Harvard University Library Open Collections Program database on reading for a well-defined list and accessible digital files of these and many other nineteenth century reading guides. See also Appendix Fig.1 for an example image of a reading guide.

³ The Harvard University Library Open Collections Program database on reading provides examples. See the American Unitarian Association’s guide *A List of Books Selected for the Use of Young Persons: and Intended Also as a Guide in the Formation of Small Libraries* (1871) and *Suggestions for Christmas Gifts: A List of Books* (1904) selected by the Public Library of the District of Columbia.

Only lately, within the expanding, interdisciplinary field of a history of reading, such ephemeral print materials have been reevaluated as windows to understanding everyday reading experiences of the past. Research within this field has often focused on primary sources such as diary entries, letters, and written marginalia of past readers, but although some scholars (such as Louise Stevenson) have also begun to point out the presence of these nineteenth century reading guides, they nevertheless remain a select few. Further, prior scholarship has often been quick to group reading guides with the ubiquitous advice manuals of their era, such as William A. Alcott's influential text *The Young Man's Guide*, which offers advice on all aspects of conduct and self-improvement, not just issues of book selection and reading. In this way, the scant research that exists on reading guides in the nineteenth century has often focused on their moralizing importance and connection to more general advice guides within an era of high-minded Victorian moral ideals. While these correlations are important toward understanding nineteenth century attitudes, by failing to distinguish reading guides independently, existing research on nineteenth century guides leaves further analyses to be desired. My research attempts to extend existing assumptions about reading guides in the late nineteenth century toward an understanding not only of the ethical and social changes in American culture, but toward an understanding of the value of literature within the society, and the identity that such communal understanding confers upon its readers.

Even within a town like Muncie, Indiana, in the small public library built into the back of the City Building, we can see not only the prevalence of reading guides but also the importance accorded to communal reading through the act of book selection. Oscar Black, for one, was not alone in choosing to take out Hamilton Mabie's guide to *Books and Culture*. At least twelve patrons are recorded as having requested the book between 1898 and 1901. Though the choice

to take out the book does not necessarily imply that it was read, or that the advice of the reading guide would have been followed (and there are instances of Muncie patrons clearly disregarding Mabie's more classically-minded advice on the best types of literature by proceeding to take out novels and romances directly after), it is nevertheless clear that Oscar Black was concerned with questions of mental and moral improvement such as those encouraged by the guide. Oscar also appears to have been concerned with questions of nationality, and to have used reading selection, particularly in the choice to take out *Our Presidents, and How We Make Them*, both to identify with his larger national community and to understand how this community is collectively formed. A skilled worker within a small town in Middle America, Oscar, therefore, was nevertheless among the growing number of Americans who were able to imagine themselves as part of a larger national community through reading, and who chose to conform, or not to conform, to the attempted reading standards of the nation as embodied by Mabie's, and other, reading guides.

By understanding reading guides not as throwaway advice columns but as ongoing dialogues between differing reading expectations in the nation, which attempted to uphold a communal value of literature and to define acceptable group practices of reading, such guides begin to be seen almost as fictive town halls allowing for conversation and group identity-formation. Research regarding this American late nineteenth century literary identity has primarily focused on the era's well-known writers. However, by adding reading guides to modern discourse on how reading plays into conceptions of nation-building—as explored through Benedict Anderson's conception of “imagined communities”, Benjamin Spencer's “literary nationalism”, and Ronald Zboray's “fictive people,”—I hope to complicate views of literary identity formation in the late nineteenth century. I seek to understand by what criteria

readers and reading guide authors began to imagine, and perhaps challenge, their own literary and national conceptions.

In chapters three and four, I present two specific nineteenth century reading guides and their revisions. The first, J.A. Spencer's adaptation of James Pycroft's *Course of English Reading* (1873), is a revised English guide, re-printed in New York after having been altered to suit a contemporary American audience. By comparing Spencer's guide to the original text, a London-printed, Eurocentric view of reading, I hope to show how Spencer's guide attempts to foster a distinctly American community of readers, even as it perhaps paradoxically muddles such an identity with appropriated European literary traditions. Second, I will compare two printed editions of Frank Parsons' *The World's Best Books: a Key to the Treasures of Literature* (first printed in 1889 and 1891). Revisions made between the two editions similarly highlight a marked tendency on the part of the American author to seek to establish an American body of literature that is both distinct from while appropriating European traditions. Both reading guide authors thereby foster conceptions of national literary identity, even as they attempt to universalize acceptable texts and reading practices.

Finally, a brief epilogue will both offer conclusions and widen the scope of the work to ask how aspects of nineteenth century reading guides have carried down to the present day. The section will offer a brief discussion of today's bestseller lists and reading guides, which have continued to grow in number in the Internet age and to influence contemporary choices of reading. My research will therefore conclude by suggesting means which further research could continue the dialogue, by showing how contemporary reading guides continue to complicate perceptions of an American literary identity.

Chapter One: A Brief Guide to the History of Reading Guides

“There is no more delightful pastime than to lecture other people on the choice of books.” –*Pall Mall Gazette* “Extra” No. 24, 1886

“Best Books” lists exploded onto the literary scene in 1886 when Sir John Lubbock compiled a list of “The Hundred Best Books” in a speech to the Working Men’s College in London. A month later, the *Pall Mall Gazette* reprinted Lubbock’s list [see Appendix Figures 2 and 3]. Unlike other reading guides of the era, many of which presented lengthy advice on how to read as much as what to read, Lubbock’s guide comprised merely a short list of books he deemed most important toward a liberal education. In the guide he categorized types of literature by Non-Christian Moralists, Theology and Devotion, Classics, Epic Poetry, Eastern Poetry, Greek Dramatists, History, Philosophy, Travels, Modern Fiction, and Poetry and General Literature, while offering a range of from two to twenty-five authors per section. Lubbock’s list of “Classics,” for example, consisted of Aristotle, Plato, Aesop, Demosthenes, Lucretius, Plutarch, Horace, and Cicero, which, one could argue, remains a fairly accurate list of authors still considered among the classics today (“Best Hundred Books,” 4).

However, Lubbock’s list was criticized as fast as it was reprinted, held up as a model guide to reading, even as it was torn apart by its readers’ revisions. Such notable contemporaries as Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, and the Prince of Wales sent in suggestions and comments to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, where they were reprinted next to Lubbock’s original list. Ruskin, in particular, simply crossed out the majority of Lubbock’s choices, putting, as he described it, “[his] pen lightly through the needless—and blottesquely through the rubbish and poison of Sir John’s list,” so as to create his own version, as shown in Appendix Figure 4 (“Best Hundred

Books,” 7). Before long, Lubbock’s list had sparked furious debates across England and the United States over what texts and authors should merit a position among “The Hundred Best Books.”

In the twentieth century, scholar Donald Foster would succinctly sum up the phenomena in an article of The American Library Association’s periodical *RQ*. After Lubbock’s list, Foster says, “soon others began drawing up their own lists and the ‘100 best books’ game became an international sport” (Foster, 20). Throughout the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, prominent scholars, particularly in the United States, increasingly published best books lists that varied by subject and audience. Foster explains:

For variety’s sake the name of the game was often changed. The “best books” and “great books” became the “books which influenced me most,” the “books everyone should read,” or the “books that most influenced Western civilization.” Upton Sinclair chose the “books we should all read before we die,” Will Durant selected the “100 best books for an education,” and Christopher Morley called his selections simply “golden florins.” (Foster, 20).

But although Lubbock’s list speaks to the volume and craze of the “hundred best books” lists of the late nineteenth century, it does not tell the full story. What Foster fails to record is that such best book lists grew out of a longer tradition of printed reading guides, which developed gradually, often as means of managing and choosing reading selections when faced with an overabundance of print. At least this is the explanation given by historian Ann Blair in her recent work *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information Before the Modern Age*. In this work, which traces a history of primarily Latin reference books and other means of writing down and managing information from the sixteenth to eighteenth century, Blair briefly points out

a longer history of reading guides, which she describes as “‘books about books,’ such as bibliographies and library and booksellers’ catalogs, which guided readers toward other books” (Blair, 160). Blair shows how as far back as the sixteenth century such guides were adopted out of growing concerns, real or imagined, of an overabundance of books and print matter. She quotes, for example, Francisco Araoz, a royal official in Seville in the early seventeenth century, who reportedly said, “‘In our time the multitude of books becomes an immensity, so that it is more effort to find and distinguish the books than it is to obtain/read the letters’” (Araoz qtd. in Blair, 161). Araoz therefore published his own guide in 1631 detailing the selection and arrangement of good books for one’s library.

Reading guides collectively, therefore, emerged not merely as a mysterious phenomenon in the nineteenth century, but rather were part of a long tradition of the use of guides and indexes as means of dealing with influxes of print. However, as the popularity of Sir John Lubbock’s “The Hundred Best Books” list illustrates, such guides did increase precipitously in number and influence in the late nineteenth century, first in England and then America. What then caused this rising demand for such guides at this time?

In part, Blair’s premise that an accumulation or perceived overabundance of print influenced new methods for organizing information holds true even if we extend her analysis past the eighteenth century cut-off of her research. After all, with the extension of the Industrial Revolution into the latter half of the nineteenth century spurring early shifts toward urbanization and an increasing mechanization of the printing process, the era witnessed an unprecedented growth in print production and distribution. In England the growth of publishing houses remained relatively confined to the hub city of London, where reading guides (and even sometimes whole books, such as many of Dickens’ classics) were often distributed through daily

newspapers such as the *Pall Mall Gazette*. The sprawling geography and population of America, however, demanded multiple publishing bases (most prominently in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia).

Initially the geographical distance and disconnection of The States impeded the supply of books throughout the largely rural American territory (particularly in the South where the conflict and aftermath of the Civil War long prevented the region's participation in the publishing industry, and held back the development of railway lines and other means of transportation). However, as publishers increasingly sought to keep up with the nation's growing demand for books and literacy, print quickly proliferated throughout the United States to the extent that by the turn of the century the nation had become, as historian Robert Gross refers to it in *A History of the Book in America Vol. 2*, "an extensive republic of print" (Gross, 544).

The growth of late nineteenth century reading guides in America can therefore be seen, in part, as a reaction to this emerging print culture, and a means of helping readers to navigate this new and at times bewildering textual market. But in doing so, such guides also began to distinguish between the texts and books available: to judge between the "good" book and "bad," or what should or should not be read based not only on the sheer quantity of books available but on the moral or so-called intrinsic merit of those books. Blair demonstrates a similar occurrence in early seventeenth century guides when she points out that, "The problem of overabundance involved not only too many books, but books ferrying too many different, new, and conflicting authorities, opinions, and experiences" (162). The same can be said about late nineteenth century America, as the growing inflow of print coincided with a nation in flux. Along with rapid industrial and social changes in the era, categories of print were also in transition,

particularly concerning the rise of popular genres. As printed matter spread throughout the nation, so too to an ever greater extent did printed newspapers and novels as well as the sensationalist story papers and dime novels read avidly by children (such as Horatio Alger's bestselling rags-to-riches tale *Ragged Dick*). Though immensely popular, such fictional stories, often about bank robbing villains or wild-west crime fighting heroes who performed daring feats to save a damsel in distress, were often criticized and condemned as immoral trash, not up to the high Victorian moral standards of the society. Choices of book selection in the late nineteenth century thereby took on an ever-greater ethical and social importance in America, and reading guides were quickly adapted from serving as a means of navigating an excess of print to a means of policing the morality of this growing print culture.

Guides such as Josiah W. Leeds' *Concerning Printed Poison* (1885) for example, emerged to directly and vehemently condemn sensational literature. Leeds writes, "There can be no mistaking the direct agency of the cheap and trashy reading matter of the day, taken in connection with variety theatre visitation, in turning out juvenile misdemeanants and well developed criminals, and that by the wholesale" (Leeds, 6). Leeds, like many Victorian moralists, equated literary value with moral and social responsibility, and therefore equated "bad" books with bad morals and "good" books with collectively approved morals and actions. Sensational stories, in this way, were seen as a byway to crime. Reading "good" books, on the other hand, could mold the public sphere, increase knowledge and morality, and protect "public decency," a virtue that Leeds insisted had to be, "maintained with all vigilance" (Leeds, iv).

Though usually not as harshly denounced as dime novels, more literary novels were often disapproved of by reading guides as well. Instead of fiction, guide authors recommended and praised nonfiction genres such as works of history or philosophy. However, the problem with

such disapproval of fiction, as historian Louise Stevenson has pointed out, comes down to the fact that, “During the nineteenth century the novel, a work of fiction that tells a story, became the most popular genre of literature. On the one hand, most of the books that reading advisors condemned were novels, and on the other hand, all but a few of the forty-five or so books reaching bestseller status between 1860 and 1880 were novels” (Stevenson, 48). It is through this central discrepancy, however, between the simultaneous popularity and condemnation of novels and other popular genres of the era, that reading guides emerge as unique and insightful objects of study. Reading guides, after all, are not bestseller lists, which, since their introduction with *The Bookman* in 1895, have been used to record the statistical popularity of books by ranking highest-selling titles. Rather, reading guides reflect a more culturally subjective perspective on literature. Instead of ranking what was actually read by the American public, many late nineteenth century reading guides attempted to rank what *should* or *should not* be read based on perceived moral, social, and even (as I attempt to show) national value judgments of literary merit. In this way, many guides act more similarly to what in the mid-twentieth century would be labeled attempts to define a Western Canon of literature. Still a contested and controversial dispute today, the “canon,” as an ideal and definitive guide to the so-called “best” and most important formative texts of all Western civilization, is essentially, after all, merely a type of reading guide, a particular list of “best books.”

By understanding the subjective nature of reading guides, which pushes toward a loosely defined and variable ideal of “best” reading for a given society, we can begin to use such guides, not necessarily to reconstruct the reality of the past, but to understand the cultural ideals and aspirations of an era. We can begin to question not only why reading guides emerged in America, and how they attempted to define and prescribe acceptable reading practices in the late

nineteenth century, but also what these practices reveal about the public's cultural ideal of reading. Based on these ideals, we can push further, questioning specifically how nineteenth century Americans collectively perceived of these new standards for literature, and how such standards reaffirmed attempts to conceptualize the imagined literary identity of the nation, as explored in chapter two.

Chapter Two: Defining a National Literary Identity

“American Nationality. In the fusion of all of its elements in a generous union under the influence of a noble National Literature lies the best (if not the *only*) hope of perpetuity for the American Confederacy.” –Cornelius Mathews, 1846

Having briefly examined the influx of print, in the context of historical change and emphases on Victorian morality, which led to the rise of reading selection guides in the late nineteenth century, let us now turn to a question that preoccupied readers and authors alike in the era: that of defining an American literary identity. By first understanding this identity on its own, the challenges and implications it led to in the late nineteenth century, and the questions it provoked for the authors and readers of the era, the role of reading guides will then finally be examined in relation to such dialogues. In this way, the guides will be understood as more than just moralizing advice manuals.

The search for literary identity, or to define an “American” standard of literature as distinct from that of other nations, is a complex pursuit indeed. After all, it essentially asks: what does it mean for literature to be conceived of as distinctly “American”? Variable as the proposition may appear, it is nonetheless a pursuit that can be traced throughout generations of American history. Benjamin Townley Spencer, in his 1957 text *The Quest for Nationality*, attempted to do just this, to trace an ongoing search for a nationally distinctive and definable literary identity in the American nation, from the time of the Revolution to the turn to the twentieth century. Through this timeline, which acts, significantly, more often as a collection of disparate literary trends than a continuously evolving identity, Spencer shows how changing perceptions of an American literary identity were often at the forefront of the public American consciousness, and were, by extension, fundamentally entangled with conceptions of an overall

national identity. Hence we see the term “literary nationalism,” which Spencer uses nearly synonymously with the pursuit of an American literary identity. Spencer admits the complexity of the term by explaining:

...the convergence of nationality and literature in what is usually called ‘literary nationalism’ confronts one, as it were, with a double variable whose processes are complex indeed. Nationality in American literature thus becomes a changing counter, a perennial compromise between the autochthonous national character on the one hand and prevailing literary doctrines on the other. The term has been and must be redefined from generation to generation as the concepts of the two entities, America and literature, shift under realignments in political power and under fresh emphases in literary criticism.

(Spencer, viii).

By simultaneously tracing both the “national character,” or national identity, of America, and its “literary doctrine,” in the influential writings of authors and critics who encouraged a distinctive literary identity throughout the nation, Spencer’s text therefore attempts to merge literary and nationalistic pursuits, while showing the changing nature of the term and its subsequent identities.

For Spencer, the quest for literary identity particularly revolved around the position of early American authors, whose works became a means of re-affirming the still fledgling literary status of the nation, and of distinguishing an “American” experience and style of writing. As Spencer explains, “At its best the quest for nationality was a concern for literary integrity—for delivering American writers from the sterile obligation to express what their own experience had not nurtured and what their own society did not require” (ix). It is in the post-bellum years, however, that Spencer credits American authors with perhaps the greatest self-awareness and

agency in such pursuits for literary identity. Tasked with re-writing national and literary identity in the aftermath of both the social upheaval and literary negligence of the Civil War, American authors in the late nineteenth century, Spencer argues, engaged in such literary endeavors to the extent that, “the importance of the conscious pursuit of nationality is in a measure suggested by the fact that scarcely a native author of any importance before 1900 failed to engage in the inquiry and to declare himself publicly on its issues” (ix)⁴.

However, by focusing views of literary nationalism primarily on the American authors of the nineteenth century, Spencer, like many historians of literary nationalism, accentuates the role of these more visible and vocal players, at the risk of limiting the role of the public. We must not forget that everyday readers in the era were also conscious of the pursuit for literary identity, and were influential in its direction. We can look to anthropologist Benedict Anderson’s influential model of what constitutes a nation to further understand this role of a reading community as it relates to conceptions of identity. Anderson’s definition of a nation as an “imagined community,” on which the shared cultural identities of a nation-state are built, relies on the modern age markets of “print capitalism” and shared “print-languages” to bring a nation’s members together under the perceived sense of a larger group community. Anderson explains the “print-languages” theory simply:

Those who might find it difficult or even impossible to understand one another in conversation became capable of comprehending one another via print and paper. In the

⁴ Spencer explains that the most vocal of such authors, particularly in the early decades of the era, was Emerson, whose advice in “The American Scholar” and Transcendentalist teachings spurred movements for literary independence and prompted writing styles grounded in an American experience. Twain, Whittier, Lowell, Whitman, and others likewise took up the call for an American literary identity in their own distinct ways and writings throughout the century, while even popular literary movements, such as the late century’s push for a “Great American Novel,” began to revolve around concerns for American authorship and individual identity.

process, they gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language-field, and at the same time that only those hundreds of thousands, or millions, so belonged. These fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community. (Anderson, 46).

In this way Anderson's national "print-languages" build communities of readers, whose literary identities, we could say, foster community-wide perceptions of nationhood, even as the reverse occurs, as the perceived community values and identity of a nation are reflected back in its national literature.

The late nineteenth century was particularly engaged with such community-wide perceptions of nationhood, as the public became increasingly concerned, as seen in the emergence of reading guides, with the values and morals inherent in literature, and its reflections upon the imagined community of the nation. Not only authors, but also everyday readers can therefore be seen to have publically engaged with questions of literary identity in the era. During a convention of the World's Congress of Representative Women in May of 1893, for example, a Mrs. M. K. Craig delivered an impassioned speech on the "Evolution of American Literature." Craig, as published in Eagle's transcription of the convention, begins her speech:

Evolution implies priority and in tracing the evolution of American literature, we acknowledge a common ancestry with the Chaucers, Miltons and Shakespeares of England; but evolution does not imply finality, and our end is not to be found in the literature of the Mother Country. We claim the independent and organic development of American literature, and by American we mean and include only the authors of the United States, for no other authors on the American continent are known distinctly as

American, and moreover, in the centuries that have elapsed since Columbus set foot on American soil, ours is the only nation of the New World that has developed an independent literature of high original thought. (Eagle, 198).

Such demands for an “independent and organic” American literature mirror earlier calls by well-known authors for literary independence. However, by explicitly seeking to define an American literature as distinct from England, or the “Mother Country,” Mrs. Craig’s speech stresses a crucial point of tension within the search for literary nationalism: the question of how to reconcile national conceptions of an “American” literature with its European influences, and particularly, English origins. Historian Robert Gross points out this tension, in Volume 2 of *The History of the Book in America*, to show the “prominent and at times dominant place of British and European books in American reading,” as one which “unsettles narratives of nationalism based on Anderson’s model” (Gross, 13). If, after all, according to Anderson’s definition, a nation is an “imagined community” with shared means of communication, or “print-languages,” than what does this shared cultural tradition of English and American literature say about an American national identity?

American proponents of literary nationalism struggled with this question throughout much of the nineteenth century, as Mrs. Craig’s attempts to both uphold national literary independence and simultaneously acknowledge inescapable literary influences from England reveal. James Hart, in *The Popular Book: A History of America’s Literary Taste* (1950), further explores this tendency in the late nineteenth century, but in relation to the rise and popularity of romance novels. He says, “Paradoxically, for many Americans to be American meant to turn one’s eyes to Europe. In various ways the United States was proving itself the inheritor and

conqueror of Europe, and merely by reading a romantic novel many people identified themselves with this aspect of the nation's success..." (Hart, 185). In the late nineteenth century, the act of borrowing a classical literary history, or tropes of Western writing, from Europe, was therefore often used to extend and uphold an American identity, and thus to strengthen the American imagined community, rather than to weaken it as could be supposed.

But although the literary border between America and Europe, or more particularly of England, in this way often remained open to cross-cultural influences, more clear distinctions were commonly made in the era between the literary identities of America and its neighboring nations. Mrs. Craig, in advocating America as "the only nation of the New World that has developed an independent literature of high original thought," for example, sets up distinct national and cultural borders between the literature of the U.S. and that of all other nations on the American continents. In an era in which the American nation saw mass European immigration, and in which questions of physical inclusion and exclusion across national borders were hotly debated, such "us" versus "them" exclusionary methods of literary identity formation can also be seen to tie in with the era's common Anglophile sentiments, and even race-based Social Darwinist philosophies of superiority. Spencer highlights the dangers of this larger social phenomenon through two critics of the era and the widespread influence of Hippolyte Taine's attention to "race, milieu, and moment":

No doubt owing to Taine's emphasis on race as one of the three determinants of the character of a nation's literature, this factor received increasing attention in the closing decades of the [nineteenth] century. Though no major author or school had yet appeared to justify their fears, Anglophile critics like Richard Grant White and Thomas Bailey

Aldrich darkly prophesized that the pure English heritage then dominant in American writing would be polluted by the taste and idiom of immigrant masses. (Spencer, 336).

Discriminatory though these conceptions are, they embody the era's heightened pursuit for national definition, as well as for a more homogenous and unified reading community, and thus nation, as understood by Anderson's model. After all, Anderson's "imagined community," which consists of a single, shared print-language or identity through which "fellow-readers" identify those, and only those, who "so belong" in their community, similarly relies on exclusionary methods of identification (46). When used on a social level, such exclusions against communities in the nineteenth century, such as against the immigrant populations arriving in the nation, often turned efforts to define a unified national or literary identity into more problematic racial divides, through which multiple, distinct "imagined communities" emerged and conflicted.

Attempts to define an overarching national literary identity in the late nineteenth century therefore often broke down because of the sheer quantity of perceived communities and readerly identities within the nation. Historian Ronald Zboray, in part, explains such failure as symptomatic of the "fictive people" or readers over whom such nationalizing identities were meant to preside. Tracing conceptions of an American literary identity in the early nineteenth century from an economic perspective, Zboray both explains capitalist attempts to homogenize an American reading experience in the era, and negates these very attempts by showing how "readers themselves seemed at times reluctant to join the great national culture crusade and instead struck off on their own peculiar quests for self-construction" (Zboray, xvi). Even as many authors and readers sought a unified literary identity, the variability of readers as a whole,

therefore, often similarly countered such pursuits. The question from the beginning of the chapter remains, as Zboray corroborates, “Given the diversity of the population, how could literature claim to be ‘American’?” (Zboray, xxii).

Zboray concludes that it is in the very diversity and democratic or autonomous nature of these variable, “fictive” readers that an American literary identity can be understood. In refusing to conform to expectations of unified reading practices, this variable reading public constantly re-imagined itself and negated attempts to define a single homogenous national literary identity. Similarly, through the divergent reading practices of this “fictive” public in the late nineteenth century, we can also begin to see a transparent split between the reading expectations of readers and authors. Spencer hints at such tensions between readerly and authorly expectations of literature in what he calls “a bifurcation in American writing” (Spencer, 112). He explains, quoting Transcendentalist Theodore Parker:

On the one hand, there were the reputable authors who aspired, however broadly national their themes, to please the discriminating and traditional taste of the cultivated few. On the other hand...only the ‘transient’ literature, only the political orations and periodical ‘productions, [which] come directly from the people and go directly to them,’ had sufficient fidelity to the popular mind to contain the ‘germ of a genuine nationality.’ (Spencer, 112-113).

In this case, readerly versus authorly expectations of what constitutes national literature are also split along a high/low, or literary versus popular (or ‘transient’) divide. It is precisely within these dichotomies of reading expectations, and what types of literature were to be considered more “genuine” to national literary identity in the late nineteenth century, that reading guides

must finally be brought back into the dialogue. Although almost entirely un-researched from a perspective of literary nationalism, given that American reading guides in the late nineteenth century attempted to define acceptable forms of literature for American audiences, such guides, by their very nature, played into the era's pursuits for literary identity and cannot any longer be ignored.

Bringing authors and readers alike into dialogue over what constitutes acceptable literature, such guides can be seen as mediators between these two parties. On one hand, reading guides often sought an absolute rule of "best" literature, and through such canon-making ideals attempted to define a homogenous American literary identity under which readers would appreciate only classically approved or morally sound literature. On the other hand, however, the less formal nature of these constantly expanding reading guides, which were revised and re-written throughout the era often by readers themselves or out of dialogue with readers over what texts should be added or subtracted, allowed them to adapt at times to the changing literary demands of their "fictive" readers.

While we must be careful not to unanimously group all reading guides from the late nineteenth century together, it is nevertheless clear that as reading guides grew in number and circulated with ever-changing editions throughout the latter half of the era, many guides directly took up such concerns for an American literary identity, writing both in response to the growing public awareness of the debate, and to spur on such efforts much like the early authors of the period. By examining changes in reading guides between editions across the period, such attentions to questions of literary nationalism can be traced. Some reading guides, for example, began to add in more American authors where there had been none or few before, or to uphold

American texts as no longer in the shadow of, but comparable to the best of English or all world literature. Given that the very use of reading guides started in England and carried over to the States originally, such guides can also be seen to inherently mimic, as well as, through reading selection, to continue to debate the era's nationalistic tensions between American and English literary identities.

Reading guides also often played into nationalistic concerns through attentions to an Anderson-modeled "American" print-language. Drawing on national pride and, at times, even Constitutional phrases, reading guides (in an era of already extremely didactic writing) often adopted overly expressive language that went beyond book-endorsing or moral pursuits for literature. Rather such language, directed at American audiences in imitation of a perceived "American" print-language, helped to build communities of impassioned, likeminded readers, as consistent with Anderson's ideas of nationhood, or with Spencer when he says, "the pursuit of nationality was no mere dispassionate critical search; it was in large part a campaign involving national pride and hence a persistent use of affective language" (Spencer, ix). The next two chapters, by looking closer at specific examples of such affective language and of these issues of literary nationalism as they emerged and can be observed in reading guides, will continue to flesh out the role of nineteenth century reading guides as they embody the era's ongoing pursuit for an American literary identity.

Chapter Three: An American Edition: Revised Reading Expectations for an American Nation

“If the advice given be followed, if the plan recommended be adopted, and the books named be used as they ought to be, I have no hesitation in predicting most satisfactory results, —especially in view... of the increase of trashy, worthless literature which is so alarming to the philanthropist and the Christian.” –J.A. Spencer, 1873

Reverend James Pycroft (1813-1895) has been all but forgotten, save perhaps for authoring *The Cricket Field* (1851), one of the earliest books to lay out the rules of, and to talk exclusively about, the sport of cricket. However, in his day, the English vicar had a long career, and authored numerous books for which he may be less well known, but which involved various topics besides the popular sport. After graduating Oxford, Pycroft published his first book, *The Student’s Guide to a Course of Reading Necessary for Obtaining University Honours* (1837). Intended for future students, as an outline of the most beneficial books for undergraduate success, the guide and its subsequent editions marked Pycroft’s initial foray into the world of nineteenth-century reading selection guides. Following in the tradition of such authors as John Lubbock and John Ruskin, Pycroft would go on to adapt his initial list into a popular reading guide for a more general English audience. The guide would be called, through many subsequent mid-to-late nineteenth century editions and adaptations, *A Course of English Reading*.

In a preface, dated Oct. 1, 1854, to an early edition of the guide, Pycroft explains that his motivation for re-writing such a text was largely born out of a conversation he had with a certain Miss Jane C. over the question of what to read. As an experienced reader, Pycroft took it upon himself to respond to Jane with a letter on books and reading practices. However, as he explains, “My letter grew into a volume, now offered for the guidance of youth in each and every

department of literature” (iv). By beginning the text itself with another dialogue, between the author and other curious readers with the same dilemma of what, and more importantly how best, to read in an era saturated with available print, Pycroft’s guide goes on to answer these curious readers by providing a list of “best” books with instructions on how to read as well as how to remember what one reads. Meanwhile, Pycroft classifies types of readers, so as to clarify the specific audience of the text as not just directed at the “youth” of England, but also a general middle-class public as determined by a specific subjective value-judgment: intelligence. He states, “Hesiod, as quoted by Aristotle, divides the world into three classes: -the first have sense of their own; the second use the sense of their neighbors; the third do neither one nor the other. Now all the advice I have to offer is addressed to the second class, with a slight hope and a sincere desire to make converts of the third” (5). While widening his initial dialogue on reading from a conversation between two people to a printed guide available to all who care to read it, Pycroft nevertheless makes sure to distinguish his discussion of reading selection as one for specific types of readers. *A Course of English Reading* proceeds to accommodate these nineteenth century readers by presenting further value-based divisions and classifications of world texts.

Focused primarily on texts for the reading of history, first of English history and then of all contemporary European events down to classical history, Pycroft’s guide presents a distinctly Anglo-centric view of reading selection. This may not be surprising coming from the Oxford-educated Brit best known for designating cricket a near-exclusively English sport, but what is surprising, perhaps, is the popularity the book garnered not only in England, but in the United States. Despite almost completely ignoring the history of the American nation, except for a passing invitation to read Parson Weem’s *Life of Washington*, Alexander Mackay’s history of

The Western World, and a few selected other texts, dozens of editions of *A Course of English Reading* appeared in America mid-century, often with few to no modifications of the original guide. Such was the case with two near identical editions re-printed in 1845 and 1854 in Philadelphia and New York respectively. Passing on the intensely English guide to an American audience without comment or revision, such guides reflected an entrenched perception of early American literary identity as a direct descendant or fragment of English history and tradition, which had yet to give way to more nationalistic conceptions.

However, even as such duplicating reprints were spreading across the early nation, hints of a burgeoning American consciousness began to emerge in other editions of Pycroft's guide. A separate edition of *A Course of English Reading* printed in New York in 1845 with additions by Massachusetts educator Joseph Green Cogswell, for example, became the first to point out Pycroft's utter lack of an American history, commenting that this was "a defect which it was clearly the duty of an American edition to remedy" (ix). The edition provided a brief Appendix with works to be consulted regarding American history, though it kept the body of the "American reprint...an exact copy of the original" (ix). Another edition in 1854, edited by the Reverend Dr. Jesse Ames Spencer, took Cogswell's steps further by questioning and amending Pycroft's lack of American history and, especially, authorship. Spencer's revised guide became the first edition to add on brief suggestions of American books within the original text. It would not be until Spencer again returned to Pycroft's guide in 1873, however, with a more heavily revised edition of *A Course of English Reading*, that changes toward the presence of a distinct American identity and body of literature began to take precedence as a separate motivation for reading selection. Eliminating Pycroft's frequently re-printed preface, which rationalizes the text as an answer for Miss Jane C., Spencer presents his own motivations for such a guide: namely to

redress the “serious defect” that within Pycroft’s original manual “America and American literature were almost entirely ignored” (6). Spencer explains his means of adapting Pycroft’s text by pointing out that, “In recommending books, too, it has been a point to call attention to such especially as are by American authors, or by standard English writers, whose books have been republished in the United States” (7). Throughout the text, though much of the wording is still copied directly from Pycroft’s manual as in former editions, Spencer therefore inserts, for nearly every section in which a list of best English authors or books on a subject are given, a set of comparable American surnames and works.

Even for less considerable lists, such as the relatively brief suggestions offered on “Criticism and Taste,” Spencer is careful to add, after a reflection on English authors, that:

American writers also have done their share in the field of Criticism, and in promoting a nobler and purer taste. Of these I may name, Prof. H. Reed’s Lectures on English Literature, and on the British Poets; E. P. Whipple’s Essays and Reviews; H. B. Wallace’s Literary Criticisms; J. R. Lowell’s Among my Books, etc.; O. W. Holmes’s English Poets of the Nineteenth Century; P. Godwin’s Critical Essays; Margaret Fuller Ossoli’s Papers on Literature and Art; Prescott’s Miscellanies. (Spencer, 267).

In this instance, while duplicating Pycroft’s English list to reflect American works, Spencer does not only add in, but elevates American authors above and beyond the level of their European counterparts.

It must here be noted that Spencer’s commitment to American authorship was likely, to an extent, personally motivated. A close contemporary of Pycroft, Jesse Ames Spencer (1816-1898) not only edited a near-duplicate version of Pycroft’s guide, but also led a career remarkably similar to Pycroft’s, if from an American perspective. Compared with the Oxford-

trained vicar Pycroft, Spencer, a New York native, graduated from Columbia in 1837 and the Episcopal Theological Seminary in 1840. He became rector of St. Paul's Church and an Emeritus Professor of Greek Language and Literature at the College of the City of New York, before he was conferred a Doctor of Sacred Theology degree from Columbia and Trinity. Dr. Spencer spent his later years writing and teaching, authoring numerous books, including a *History of the Reformation in England* and a *History of the United States From the Earliest Period to the Present Time*⁵. The later text is included in Spencer's edition of *A Course of English Reading*, perhaps hinting at an element of self-advertisement or advancement among Spencer's motivations for publishing such a guide. But the resemblance between the two men's training, and their partiality toward history in particular, may also have been what initially attracted Spencer to Pycroft's guide as a model for what books to read. Through inserting his own book as an example of American erudition and unique history, Spencer goes head-to-head with, and likely hopes to prove himself and his American contemporaries of equal stature to, Pycroft's English scholars.

As the largest reading advice section of Pycroft's guide, and on a topic most familiar to Spencer, the history section of the text therefore becomes the main arena for Spencer's revisions. Nor is he shy about his changes. After copied remarks from Pycroft's text on how to read effectively, Spencer reorders a chapter on the study of modern, and particularly English, history, to follow a new chapter he adds "On the Study of the History of the United States of America" (115). Well aware of his American audience, Spencer proclaims in this section that, "this portion of history I regard as of prime importance to every American, and he ought to be perfectly at home here if anywhere," before adding that, "Every American, whether young or old, ought to

⁵ Biographical information on Jesse Ames Spencer from September 3, 1898 obituary notice in *The New York Times*.

consider it a point of honor, whatever other history he reads or studies, to be *master* of that of his own country” (115). In this way, Spencer widens the reference of his advice, beyond the “youths” of Pycroft’s introduction, to all Americans “young or old,” and he assigns new expectations of reading onto this specific audience. For by implying that American readers should no longer be content to read English history as their own, Spencer’s guide distinguishes American readers as a community apart from Pycroft’s English audience, and thereby expects them to conform to a different set of reading expectations, starting by becoming “masters” of their own American heritage.

It then becomes the aim of Spencer’s guide to highlight and define such a heritage, which had not existed in Pycroft’s guide. Dividing the short history of the United States into eight parts, with brief descriptions and a list of books within each, in the same way Pycroft’s guide of England is divided into six historical eras, Spencer lends credibility and an appearance of longevity to the new nation. Further, Spencer’s choices of books for the American public help him to define a distinct conception of this history. For example, he includes nearly exclusively pro-Union titles under a section on the recent “War of Succession and Rebellion” (121). Almost as an afterthought, a much shorter list of books are given “on the State-rights and Succession side, [which] the reader may, if so inclined, look into...” (121).

Finally, Spencer ends the section on American history with a nod toward texts about Central and South America. In Pycroft’s guide, the briefest mention of a United States history advises Mackay’s *Western World*, as “by far the best and most instructive work that has been published in England on the United States” (142). This reflection appears during a section on English colonies, where, after texts on India, the American continents are referenced together as a group. Spencer’s treatment of the Americas could not be more different, as after his elaborate

defense of a United States history, he comments, “In regard to Central and South America, my readers will probably be easily satisfied. Owing to various causes, a large part of the history of these portions of the Continent is made up of records of painful and continuous struggles, discords, factions, and the like. The Cyclopedias and General Histories contain all the information usually cared for...” (123). By slighting the histories of these continents, and differentiating them as distinct from and lesser than the American nation, Spencer therefore uses books and reading practices as a means to define the very borders of the country and to establish historical and cultural markers of inclusion and exclusion. As a historian himself, Spencer would have been highly aware of the role an elevated narrative of history can have on defining group identity, which might have caused him to make such revisions to Pycroft’s guide.

Similar aims to define a distinctly American readership as separate from that of other nations can be inferred from Spencer’s style of language. For although there are no markers or divisions in the text to distinguish between Pycroft’s original sections and Spencer’s additions, the language Spencer adopts readily distinguishes his voice and further emphasizes his pro-American sentiments. For example, at the end of the preface while explaining his hopes for the guide, Spencer acknowledges his, “conviction, that, if properly and faithfully used, it will do its share toward promoting sound and healthful taste in literature and in the pursuit of truth and goodness” (8). There can be no coincidence in the fact that while promoting an American history and body of literature, Spencer adopts such democratic language for his countrymen. By referring to the guide as a “pursuit of truth and goodness,” Spencer not only elevates the moral importance of reading selection, as many guides in the era proceeded to do, but alludes to the rhetorical language of the Declaration, that original guidebook of the early nation and marker of one distinct American “print-language,” as the term is understood by Anderson in chapter two.

Spencer uses similarly prominent, nationalistic language while adding a selection of American poets to Pycroft's list. He concludes, "Our country has done her share in this attractive field, and there is no American but what may feel proud of the writings of the gifted sons and daughters of song throughout our land" (260). Not only does such language attempt to excite unity and pride in an American audience, but it also separates Spencer's more patriotic new sections from Pycroft's composed, even relatively languid prose.

At various sections throughout the guide, Spencer continues to integrate high-minded American phrases and values within an otherwise overtly English, or Eurocentric, text. At one point, for example, his advice on reading American history becomes so inflated as to sound, out of context, as if it has nothing to do with reading at all, but as if it is a speech on larger life lessons and principles of a perceived American work ethic. Without mentioning books or reading once, he says:

Do not undertake too much at a time. Do not be in too great a hurry, or easily discouraged. You can accomplish wonders by system, by division of labor, by studying with attention, and when you are fully alive to the value and importance of what you are doing. Keep up good heart; if your progress be slow, try hard to make it sure and solid; and by-and-by you will reap your reward. (Spencer, 117).

Written true to the emerging American mind-set, in the increasingly industrial age, that those who work hard will be rewarded or that slow and steady wins the race, this passage reflects Spencer's adoption of what he perceives as an "American style of language." As Anderson's conception of "print-languages" in the formation of nationalism has shown, Spencer in this way is able to both address and define the American audience to which his advice is directed.

However, even when Spencer is at such a peak of nationalistic sentiments and praise for an American tradition of authorship, his words are never fully divided from the Anglo-centric text in which they appear. Similar perceptions of an American literary identity tied to European influences can be found in James Hart's account of *The Popular Book: a History of America's Literary Taste*. As mentioned briefly in chapter two, Hart explains how the emerging literature of late nineteenth century Americans sought to re-invent the nation as an "inheritor and conqueror of Europe," given that they were never fully able to look away, or to tear the country from its European origins (Hart, 185). Spencer's guide, as an adaptation of an earlier English edition, instead of an individual reading guide in its own right, does the same thing. For though the guide inserts a tradition of American authorship, the vast majority of the text re-prints Pycroft's exact list. Spencer goes so far to maintain Pycroft's exact wording, when possible, that strange tensions begin to emerge at times between the original recommendations and Spencer's additions. For example, after Spencer's extra section on a history of the United States, he reverts directly back to Pycroft's original section on the study of English History, which begins with Pycroft saying, "The first step, as I have before observed, is to read some History of England through" (124). Of course Spencer would not recommend a History of England, above all else, to his American audience directly after stating the opposite, but he leaves the wording the same as in Pycroft's previous editions.

Spencer's deference to Pycroft's original guide hints back to the era's larger, nation-wide trend to still see American writers under the shadow of their English predecessors. Spencer makes it a point to directly recognize the debt that the American nation felt it owed to English tradition, when he says, "it is but right to say that there has been no disposition to forget or undervalue the fact that we are inheritors of the wealth and abundance of English literature, and

that we owe a debt of deep gratitude to the great writers, in every department, of the land whence our fathers came” (7). The fact that an American literary tradition could only ever be as old as the young nation, and never older, and therefore that Spencer could only add in American names to an already long list of established literature, meant that the young nation’s literary identity could not yet, if ever, be totally divorced from that of the Continent. Therefore, even as Spencer works to elevate American literary and historical traditions through his revisions to Pycroft’s guide, his very means of doing so can go no further than to place such an American identity at the level of, or even essentially on the shoulders of, an appropriated English tradition.

Therefore, as James Pycroft’s *A Course of English Reading* spread throughout America in the late nineteenth century, the country faced a divided response: some eager to reprint the English guide word-for-word and thereby carry on a literary tradition dominated by English examples, while others began to question and revise such a guide in favor of more equal American representation. Jesse Ames Spencer’s 1873 edition would take such revisions the furthest, by adding sections of American history and authorship as well as exploiting a distinctly American print-language to define the young nation’s audience of readers, and separate its contributions, language, and values as distinct from those of other nations. However, even as Spencer’s edition thereby sought to uphold and unify a distinctly American literary identity, it remained bound to Pycroft’s Anglo-centric guide, and as such, bound to an origin, and in part an identity, of English tradition.

While little about Pycroft, Spencer, and their unique reading guides have been explored in modern research, questions, such as the extent to which readers actually read and followed the advice given, are sure to proliferate. But through further individual analysis of reading guides, I

believe such ideas put forth will prove valid representations of the larger occurrences of reading guides and practices to emerge over the late nineteenth century.

Chapter Four: An American Guide: Response to the Nation's Readers

“Let no hour go idly by that can be rendered rich and happy with a glorious bit of Shakespeare, Dante, or Carlyle.” –Frank Parsons, 1889

As reading guides such as Pycroft's shifted across the Atlantic, bringing European voices and traditions to American readers, American authors also took up the challenge to define the “best books.” Frank Parsons (1854-1908) was one such author. A diligent scholar and progressive reformer from Mount Holly, New Jersey, Parsons, as remembered by biographer and historian Arthur Mann, was inexhaustible in his prolixity and dedication to public service in the gilded age. Entering Cornell at age fifteen, Parson graduated three years later at the top of his class with a bachelor's degree in civil engineering. After a brief stint as a railroad engineer, Parsons took the Massachusetts bar in 1881; but finding private practice not to his liking, he turned to writing legal textbooks, and became a professor at the law school of Boston University from 1892 to 1905. In the meantime, the well-read professor supplemented his income with a series of lectures on English literature, which became the basis for an 1889 publication entitled *The World's Best Books: A Key to the Treasures of Literature*.

In Parsons' own words, this short text was “meant to be a practical handbook of universal literature for the use of students, business men, teachers, and any other persons who direct the reading of others...” (2). Parsons, like Pycroft, thereby directs his guide at a specific type of audience, whom he charges with then further disseminating the information to readers at large. Meanwhile he charges the guide itself with five purposes: to highlight the importance of reading in general, to select the best texts to read out of all literatures of the world, to show the relations

of these texts in context of “time and space,” to suggest the best methods of reading, and lastly to offer quotations about books and reading (2).

In the context of an era filled with such guides, each bent on more or less similar intentions, Parsons is careful to state that he wishes his guide to fulfill these purposes, “with far greater precision, definiteness, and detail than it has ever been done before” (1). There is therefore a subtle metaliterary component to Parsons’ text. For having been published in 1889, while many previous reading guides were already in circulation from both English and American authors, Parsons was able to self-referentially reflect on the occurrence of such guides as a whole. He even went so far as to include within his text on best books a section on “Guides” specifically, which he classifies as “books that will be useful in arriving at a fuller knowledge of literature and authors, in determining what to read, and in our own literary efforts” (62). The section includes John Lubbock’s original list, as well as John Ruskin’s and other contemporary author’s guides. It is clear, therefore, that Parsons was aware of, and within his own guide broadcasted, a history of earlier reading guides, even though, by duplicating such texts, he added to the very mass of textual information such guides sought to navigate readers through. Why then write another guide?

In part, this phenomenon toward an increasing number of reading guides in the late nineteenth century, as opposed to, for example, seeing a single guide increase in popularity, acts as an indication of the era’s variable reading practices. As explored in connection to Robert Zboray’s “fictive people” in chapter two, American readers did not always read what they were advised to read, or adhere to the homogenizing reading practices of reading guides. Individual readers, such as Parsons, therefore increasingly took the issue into their own hands, publishing their own reading lists and expectations of readers throughout the era. Further, similar to Louis

Stevenson's examination of such guides in chapter one, the ever-growing publication and dissemination of text in the late nineteenth century, in conjunction with heightened Victorian ideals, often produced genuine fear on the part of readers, who therefore turned author, not only to combat these mass influxes of text, but also to curb potentially dangerous reading practices.

It is clear from Parsons' introduction that the moral importance placed on reading was a crucial concern in his decision to write the guide. He specifically states, "The selection of books is of the utmost importance, in view of their influence upon character," recalling Stevenson's idea that reading guides sought to aid in readers' morals and individual growth according to socially-acceptable Victorian codes of conduct (6). In the same vein, while Parsons says that good books can be incredibly important to improving the mind and one's character, he also goes on to fervently warn readers, "On the other hand, the mind may be greatly injured, if not wholly destroyed, by pouring into it a flood of filth and nonsense; or by a torrent of even the best in literature, so rapid and long continued that it cannot be properly absorbed and digested. The evil effects of cramming the mind are only too often seen about us" (3).

While drawing on the moral motivations and dangers of reading selection, Parsons also adopts the familiar language and metaphors of former reading guides. For example, Stevenson shows how, "frequently advisers drew upon metaphors of food to express the deep level at which they assumed books and reading were natural parts of life" (46). Though she does not reference Parsons' guide directly, Stevenson's analysis of reading guides in general can be seen in Parsons' style, as when he says, "Besides the regulation of the *total* quantity we read, with reference to our powers of digestion, we must watch the *relative* amounts of all the various kinds of literary sustenance we take" (5). The moral responsibilities of reading selection for both body and mind therefore continued to influence guide authors in the late nineteenth century.

However, while sorting reading selection by such morally good versus bad books, with advice on how to choose texts and how to read effectively for sound health, Parsons also introduces his own qualifications for selecting and breaking down literature, which distinguish his guide from those before it. One such method, which Parsons includes among the five main purposes of the guide, is to break down works of literature by “time and space.” Parsons creates a chart “Showing the Distribution of the Best Literature in Time and Space, with a Parallel Reference to some of the World’s Great Events” [see Appendix Fig. 5] (82). Essentially acting as a timeline that places Parsons’ chosen authors on a geographical and historical scale, the chart ranges from the first millennium BC to the end of the nineteenth century AD, with a note that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are not ordered by the unit space, as the length of the chart would then have been “impossible” to fit (82).

This method of presenting literature is significant in that it moves away from moral-value judgments—all of the authors’ works being among “the best,” or essentially of equal moral merit—even as distinctions are made to keep the texts from being seen as equal. For the chart does not merely list all authors or “good” texts in a distinction-less order, as many former guides had done, but seeks new categorizations that go beyond moral judgments, and even beyond the texts themselves, to place the authors in their historical moments. Such a chronological sequence alone might not be unique, except that combined with a distinction of space, by which contemporaneous authors are grouped under headings such as “Rome,” “France,” “Italy,” “Spain,” etc., and are placed in relation to key historical events, Parsons’ chart moves toward a nationalizing conception of distinct literary identities.

This concept of dividing literature by national history and identity becomes more obvious as Parsons adopts these terms for himself, as when he includes within the guide a section entitled

“The Fountains of National Literatures” (109). In this section, Parsons identifies eight world texts as the foundational works and inspirations for all subsequent national literature and identity: Homer’s *Iliad*; the German “*Nibelungenlied*”; the Spanish “*Chronicle of the Sid*”; the “*Chansons de Gestes*,” the “*Romans*,” and the “*Fabliaux*” of the French; and “*Beowulf*” and the “*Morte D’Arthur*” of English literature. As in his former chart of time and space, in this chapter, Parsons distinguishes and segments each text by nationality (or at least by their subsequent influences on contemporary literary nationalities despite the fact that the texts were largely written during eras before such conceptions of nationhood). But in doing so, Parsons also presents a more unified survey of world literature, as each text is upheld as being of equal merit and general significance in a seemingly over-arching history of worldly texts. He even goes so far to group these texts and universalize their significance that he compares them to “the headwaters of the literary Nile” (110).

Such unifications refer back to Parsons’ overall objective for the guide: to present a “handbook of universal literature” (2). And, further, by defining such universal fountainheads of literature and recommending them to all future readers, Parsons’ “handbook” adheres to the important task of reading guides in the era of taking on the role of canon-maker for society. Even while seeking such a universal norm in reading selection, however, there therefore remains a unique irony within Parsons’ guide as he strives to present both the local and universal, or identities of worldly and national literatures, simultaneously. It is within these tensions that questions regarding the American author’s stance on his own country’s sense of literary nationalism come into play.

In beginning to understand Parsons relations to an American literary identity, let us first go back briefly to Parsons’ chart of time and space. It must be remembered that Parsons includes

a side note explaining that the category of space is discontinued for the eighteenth and nineteenth century authors at the end of the chart. This note is significant, for though the chart visually unifies a history of all world literature, even as it distinguishes by nationalities, Parsons skews this history in favor of these latter two centuries. The chart itself particularly emphasizes this bias, as the number of “best” authors given for the last two centuries, and particularly of those under the heading “English Literature,” are seen to far outweigh the rest of the authors in the chart [again, see Fig. 5]. This is in part due to the fact that it is precisely within these last sections on eighteenth and nineteenth century literature, when space is no longer designated, that American authors appear. American authors, instead of receiving a separate space in the chart, as being geographically distinct from England, are grouped within the category of “English Literature” for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, thereby adding to the visual prominence of this section of the chart, and essentially turning the category into a language-based instead of spatial or national distinction.

The layout of the chart as a whole takes this idea of a unified history of “English Literature” further. Constructing a timeline of years in the middle rather than on one end of the chart, Parsons splits each of the authors to the right and left of this divide. Tellingly, the left-hand side of the chart is made up of a history of classical Greek and Roman literature, which segues into “English Literature” as the timeline progresses, while the right-hand side is filled with all the remaining world authors (82-86). In this way, American and English authors are not only grouped together in the chart under the designation of “English Literature,” but are represented as following, or essentially as inheriting, a history of classical literature.

Parsons continues to unify the history of American and English literatures throughout the first edition of his guide. For example, like Pycroft, Parsons includes a brief section that

breaks reading selection down by periods of English literature—an Anglo-centric literature, divided into periods in relation to Shakespeare, which the American author refers to nonetheless as “our literature” (94). He goes on to conclude this history with the overall greatest authors of all worldly literature, stating, “We have thus named as the chiefs, twenty authors in English, ten in Greek, three of Rome, two of Italy, ten of France, two of Spain, seven of Germany, three of Persia, one of Portugal, one of Denmark, and two of Russia...” (108). By subtly switching his point of criteria, from language (English or Greek) to place (such as Rome or Italy), in a similar manner to suddenly switching categories at the end of the chart of time and space, Parsons is thereby able to present American and English authors together. By doing so, Parsons’ guide, like many of Pycroft’s earlier unchanged guides for an American audience, plays into ongoing perceptions common in the era that American literature was but a part of an English or larger European tradition.

And yet, as an American author, and one clearly concerned with questions of national literary identities, Parsons’ seeming lack of distinguishing an American literary history apart from England appears incongruous. After all, there is a fine line between whether such proponents, by joining American with English sources, thereby belittled an American literary identity as in the shadow of European literature, or sought to elevate it, by essentially affixing American literature as an extenuation and natural inheritor of a longer and more established Anglo-Saxon, or even longer classical, tradition. The question becomes, with which side was Frank Parsons and his guide aligned?

The author’s later biography, as well as subsequent editions of *The World’s Best Books*, begins to unlock his intentions regarding such an ambiguous American/Anglo-Saxon literary identity. For after beginning his career as an engineer, scholar, lawyer, and author, in the 1890s

Parsons again switched professions, turning to his most important and remembered role: that of a progressive social and educational reformer. Disillusioned by growing inequalities in wealth, largely brought about by the Carnegies and Rockefellers of the gilded age, Parsons began to tirelessly draft and publish thick tomes of social, political, and economic theories of reform for the nation throughout the last decade of the nineteenth century, churning out volumes as varied as from an economic formulation of Mutualism in *Our Country's Need* (1894) to an earnest social critique in *The City for the People* (1899).

Meanwhile, reading continued to occupy Parsons' thoughts and to play a central role in his theories of reform. Parsons' posthumously published final advice guide entitled *Choosing a Vocation*, for example, sought to guide young men and women in the process of choosing a career, and eventually caused the author to be labeled a major reformer in the American educational system. Though focused on the subject of one's career rather than book choices, the text often embodies the voice and purpose of a reading guide, as for example when it advises, "While you are studying and working on the direct lines of your intended vocation, do not neglect the advantages to be secured by continued reading of the best books, especially those on history, economics, and natural science, with Emerson's "Essays" and some good poetry" (113). By continuing to uphold the "advantages" of reading, Parsons' last book therefore continues to connect back to his earliest ideas in *The World's Best Books* of how reading selection can be used as a means of individual character and moral formation or development. Many of Parsons' reforms even of a more general nature would come to rely on this assumption of how reading, or as he later came to reflect, education, could be used to influence the social character, or thus identity, of individuals. Parsons, as an early advocate of social reform, took such sentiments so far as to say in *Our Country's Need* (1894) that, "Life can be moulded into any conceivable

form. Draw up your specifications for man...and if you will give me control of the environment and time enough, I will clothe your dreams in flesh and blood” (2). As in the case of his reading guide, it is clear that Parsons was already consciously attempting to do just that: to mold the common reader to set “specifications” of morals and expectations for book selection, and thereby to fashion an ideally educated citizenry, or community of likeminded readers under his conception of an ideal American literary identity. Parsons’ widespread and impassioned reform efforts in the last decade of the nineteenth century, targeted at the American nation during a time of widespread social and economic fluctuation, would therefore particularly come to reflect the author’s continued interest in, and engagement with, issues surrounding the national identity and moral progress of the nation, similar to those initially explored in his early reading guide.

By repositioning questions of national identity from a literary to social perspective, however, Parsons’ ideas of such identity through reform, especially as they relate to a shared American/Anglo-Saxon tradition, can be seen to translate into problematic Anglophile and race-based sentiments. For example, on the heated subject of immigration in the era, Mann shows how Parsons, in part under the influence of the era’s popular, if discriminatory, endorsement of Social Darwinism, “identified the American ‘race’ with the English speaking peoples who had led the world in democracy and declared that further progress was impossible if the United States lost its ‘heroic blood by the foul admixture of serfhood...pouring in from Europe’” (Mann, 483). Such strong prejudices against the era’s specifically Eastern European immigrants, as explored by Benjamin Spencer in chapter two, were common in the late nineteenth century, particularly as attempts to define a more homogenous American national identity increasingly turned on exclusionary divisions of race. Intriguingly, on a side note, Parsons would also go on to assert

the role of literacy as a determination of such national identity, in proposing that immigrants pass an English literacy test before admission to the country (although what this test would entail is uncertain).

Further, it was in the early 1890s, while Parsons was actively exploring theories of reform and confronting issues of social identity, when the reformer returned to his early reading guide. He chose to edit and re-publish *The World's Best Books* in two subsequent editions in 1891 and 1893 respectively. While these two later editions remain comparatively similar to each other, they are distinguished from the first guide by subtle alterations that reflect both Parsons' changing mindset and larger ongoing changes within the country. Parsons' second edition guide as compared with the first, for example, consciously includes a greater "American" presence, while beginning to distinguish this identity from its English origins. This is most noticeable in Parsons' section on "Fiction." Whereas in the first edition Parsons writes, "In fiction, England and France are far ahead of the rest of the world," he revises his statement by the second guide to state, "In fiction, England, America, and France are far ahead of the rest of the world" (53; 58). The addition may seem slight, but it represents an important step in Parsons' thoughts to view an American literary identity on its own, and not only as an inheritor but now also as an equal to English literature. Originally followed by brief examples of the best English and French fiction writers (before a longer list of all selected works of various nations), Parsons in the second edition further adds (after the English but before French) a list of American authors. He claims proudly, "The United States can boast of Hawthorne, Tourgee, Wallace, Hearn, Aldrich, Warner, Curtis, Jewett, Craddock, and many others" (58)⁶.

⁶ Though many of these "best" American authors remain obscure today (especially in comparison to the list of English authors, which includes Dickens, Fielding, DeFoe, Austen,

As acknowledged briefly within his later text *Choosing a Vocation*, Parsons was also particularly impressed with the American author Emerson, who was himself a proponent of American literary nationalism through Transcendentalist calls for literary independence (as shown by Spencer in chapter two). Though Emerson had been briefly mentioned in Parsons' first edition reading guide, it is notable therefore that by the second edition Emerson has been added among Parsons' concluding list of what he considers the ten greatest authors of English literature since 1740: a list including the likes of Byron, Tennyson, Dickens, Carlyle, and even Darwin.

Though several influential American authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Mark Twain were also present in both editions of the guide, Parsons' particularly chooses to add in and highlight more American authors in his second edition than before, and to do so primarily within the category of fiction. This attention to fiction as the primary means of making a distinction between English and American authors is important, for with novels still gaining favor as a relatively recent genre, nearly all of the authors of this category are pulled from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Here alone, therefore, American authors are set on equal footing, time wise, to other national traditions of literature. Further, the widespread popularity of fiction increasingly played into the literary identity of the American nation throughout the nineteenth century: it was works of fiction that Americans turned to on trains, often to escape changing social and economic conditions; fiction, sensational or otherwise, that schoolboys rushed to buy from newsstands and droves of children began to borrow from the nation's new libraries; and fiction which fueled the public's imagination, turning bestselling authors into celebrities, and leading to the growth of book clubs, reviews, and even reading guides, such as Parsons', out of

and more), the pride with which Parsons upholds his contemporaries underlies his nationalist objectives.

concerns to distinguish the “good” from the “bad”⁷.

By 1891, it is clear Parsons was well aware of this unstoppable movement in American literature. Revisions to his second edition guide therefore begin to mirror the national change, not only through greater attention to American fiction writers (and by extension an enlarged section on fiction in general), but by creating new criteria to define which books hold intrinsic merit. For example, whereas in his first edition, Parsons holds true to a classical view of literature, in seeking to establish a universal canon of texts, by the second edition he is shown to bend to his readership. Parsons originally states, “The profits of reading what is merely of the moment are not so great as those accruing from the reading of literature that is of all time...On this principle, most of our time should be spent on classics, and very little upon transient matter” (91-2). Despite such attempts to mold the public consciousness to this more classical appreciation of literature, Parsons’ advice is largely ignored by readers who continue to read transient materials, sensational texts, and, most particularly, novels to an ever greater degree in the late nineteenth century.

Parsons therefore revises his position in the second edition of the guide, allowing for a new justification of novels, by creating new criteria through which to judge the intrinsic merit of a book, based on judgments of motive, magnitude, unity, universality, suggestiveness, and expression. Using the immensely popular British and American novels *Robert Elsmere* by Mrs. Humphry Ward and *Looking Backward* by Edward Bellamy as examples, Parsons uses his new criteria to prove the intrinsic merit of these works of popular fiction. Having first shown doubts that the novels were intrinsically of high rank, Parsons nevertheless concludes:

⁷ See Ronald Zboray’s *A Fictive People* for an insightful analysis of the adapted reading practices and growth of fictional texts that emerged in the nineteenth century out of changing economic realities.

Having now examined the tests of intrinsic merit, let me revert for a moment to my remark, a few pages back, to the effect that “Looking Backward” and “Robert Elsmere” deserve a high rank. They are books of *lofty aim*, great magnitude of subject and thought, fine unity, *wide universality*, *exhaustless suggestiveness*, and more than ordinary power of expression. Doubtless they are not *absolute* classics...But they are *relative* classics, -- books that are of great value to their age, and will be great as long as their subjects are prominent. (Parsons, 148).

By upholding these works of popular fiction, even allowing them to be seen as “*relative* classics,” the second edition guide therefore responds to changing conceptions of literature within the nation, even though doing so reveals tensions between Parsons’ original reading expectations, and the un-conforming reader practices of the nation.

An added preface to the second edition guide further illuminates such tensions between the readers’ versus the guide writer’s expectations for an American literary identity. Parsons shows that the second edition’s revisions were born out of a dialogue with readers, having being made in response to many critiques and suggestions sent to him. In responding to these readers, Parsons is forced to admit that, “this little volume is not intended as an *infallible* guide, or as anything more than a *stimulus* to seek the best, and a *suggestion* of the best method of guiding one’s self...” (v). He acknowledges the wide variability of opinion inherent in shaping such a guide, and the virtual impossibility of total cohesion, by stating, “The difficulties of making a true list may be illustrated by the fact that one critic of much ability affirms that Marietta Holley [a famous American humor writer] ought to head the tenth column, as the best humorist of all time; another says it is absurd to place her above the Roman wits Jubenal and Lucian; and a third declares with equal positiveness that she ought not to appear in the list at all” (vii). This in itself

speaks for the variable and often disjointed identity of American readers in the era, and highlights a central issue nineteenth century reading guide authors faced in their attempts to define literary identities for their contemporary readers: that, perhaps unlike works of history or writings which sought to establish an identity over the past, reading guide writers could not assert claims without protest. They rather had to contend with their own audience as subjects, particularly as contemporary readers consistently engaged with, added to, and at times deterred the guides' very conceptions of themselves as readers.

However, even as Parsons allows for such debates with readers and adapts his guide based on their input, he concludes the issue of Marietta Holley by stating in relation to such critical readers that, "We differ from them all, and think the high place we have given Miss Holley is very near the truth" (vii). Ever the idealistic reformer, Parsons in this way continues to uphold his universal intentions for the text, and to reaffirm the text's attempt to deliver a single canon of worldly literature, which, may not be "infallible," but which according to Parsons most closely resembles "the truth." If "truth," though, Spencer's list represents only one reader's fleeting conception of it, quickly challenged and replaced by other reading guides, as new editions and readers continued to add their own conceptions of the nation's literary identity. If "truth" it is only of how variable the very conception of this literary identity really is.

Attempting to establish a universal canon of worldly literature, while defining a still elusive American literary identity in an era of wide literary, social, and economic reform, Frank Parsons' *The World's Best Books* and its subsequent revisions are therefore emblematic of the era's ongoing discourse surrounding questions of reading and identity formation.

Epilogue: Reading Guides in the Internet Age

“Reading has become one of the hottest subjects in the humanities, perhaps because it seems especially intriguing now that so much of it has shifted from the printed page to the computer screen.” –Robert Darnton

This project set out to explore and elevate the role of late nineteenth century reading guides as they relate to the era’s aspirations to define literary nationalism in America. Reading guides, in this capacity, have become useful means of analysis for revealing not necessarily *what* was read in a given era, but what guide authors and their critics often believed a populace *should* have read, and therefore what image of a national literary identity reading publics were *expected* to play into, whether they conformed to it in reality or not. Reading guides therefore can be seen as rulebooks, or guidelines to identity expectations, because they specify for a given nation or community-audience what to read or what not to read so as to fit into the ideals of perceived national literary identities.

In this role, however, reading guides can also be used to begin to point out the inconsistencies and conflicts within the very conceptions of literary identities they attempt to establish. This project has explored several of these conflicts already. For example, late nineteenth century guides have helped to demonstrate the conflicting literary expectations between American readers and authors (or what often came down to highbrow versus lowbrow standards of literature), as well as the inherent dilemma within many guides regarding whether to establish national or universal expectations of reading (especially concerning whether to include longstanding English literary traditions as part of an American literary identity). Further, the sheer quantity and variety of reading guides published in the late nineteenth century can be seen

to mirror the multidimensional aspect of identity-formation that keeps it from clear definition. In other words, these very conflicts and differing opinions on reading selection convey the impossibility of ever defining a single unified American literary identity.

But where does this leave us today? Though my research has focused on the history of reading guides in the late nineteenth century, the phenomenon has by no means ended. In fact, in the modern information age, as readers are once again inundated with print and given near unlimited access not only to books but also to means of publication, reading guides have become more common than ever before. Of course recently the excess of the printed word has been primarily brought about by the advent of the Internet, and reading guides, while still helping to sort through available information and to identify “best” books and reading practices like their nineteenth century precedents, have adapted into new forms accordingly. Thus from hugely influential, individual guides, like selections for Oprah’s Book Club, to continued efforts of canon-making or literary prizing and censoring, down to the pervasive reader-made lists and debates of online forums, reading guides, largely with the help of the Internet, have exploded in the twenty-first century.

Unlike earlier guides, this modern culture of reading guides has not gone ignored. As more books have become available, and better means of distributing and discussing these books have emerged, more reading guides have been written, and many have gained immense popularity and scholarly attention in their own right. For example, The Modern Library’s collection of *The World’s Best Books*, first published by Macy’s in 1930, has often been credited with first commercializing reading guides and encouraging their public use⁸, while the fifty-four volume anthology series *Great Books of the Western World*, first published in 1952 by

⁸ As argued by Jay Satterfield in *World's Best Books: Taste, Culture, and the Modern Library*.

Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., set out with the intention of establishing the foundation for what comprises the Western Canon⁹. Meanwhile, the well-known Norton Anthology series, and many others like it, have similarly attempted to narrow down all literature into collections of best texts, often by specific genres or other classifications. And even college course guides for reading, particularly for “Great Books” programs (such as the one offered at the University of Michigan), can be considered variations on reading guides, as they attempt to choose a selection of “best books” by which undergraduates can receive a liberal education grounded in a Western literary tradition (which was the same intention, we can add, as Pycroft’s original *Course of Reading Necessary for Obtaining University Honours* for Oxford students).

While these examples of familiar guides and book series have mostly been created by corporations or large groups (hence attempting to appear “objective”), many modern reading guides by specific, often famous, individuals have also become popular in their own right (much as John Lubbock’s original list became a popular standard for reading selection and guides in nineteenth century England). We therefore see the popularity of guides that tell us the book lists of our favorite authors, such as Peder Zane’s *The Top Ten: Writers Pick Their Favorite Books*, a collection of the top ten favorite books lists of over one hundred twenty-five well-known contemporary authors. And, of course, there is the ubiquitous reading list of Oprah’s Book Club, essentially a list of Oprah’s favorite books gradually compiled over the course of her talk show, which has become popular on such a national scale that its book selections (even those originally obscure) have often risen to the status of national bestsellers¹⁰. These diverse examples remain

⁹ See the introductory volume to the set *The Great Conversation: The Substance Of A Liberal Education (Great Books Of The Western World, #1)* by Robert Maynard Hutchins.

¹⁰ See “Oprah’s Book Club: The Complete List Reading List” on Oprah’s website. For academic scholarship on the popularity of the Book Club, refer to Cecilia Farr’s “Reading Oprah: How Oprah’s Book Club Changed the Way America Reads.”

but a few of many thousands of reading guides that have gained attention and popularity in recent years.

However, much like late nineteenth century guides, the prominence of many of these types of highly commercialized or famous-author-endorsed literary guides has also perhaps blinded us to the more common, everyday creation of reading guides and discussions of book selection by contemporary readers. After all, it must be noted that out of the perhaps thousands of guides on the Internet today (again the sheer quantity of guides remains indefinite), most are not celebrity-endorsed, and have not been studied as much more than a current trend. It is perhaps the very ubiquity of online guides that blinds us to their history and importance, but if we are to understand national reading practices and to continue dialogues on reading and literary identity, we must once again turn from examinations of more conspicuous authors to an understanding of a general public of readers. Future research can and should, therefore, turn toward more current, if often understudied, examples of reading guides, such as the immense popularity in recent years of online reading sites and forums.

Although there are many similar sites across the Web, Goodreads, a social networking site for booklovers, deserves particular recognition as the largest site of its kind for readers and book recommenders (with over twenty-five million members¹¹). On Goodreads, viewers create virtual bookshelves to show what books they have read, are reading, or would like to read, while an entire section of the site, called “Listopia,” is dedicated to recommending books through “best books” lists. Hundreds of these lists have been created, with categories ranging from the best books of every century, decade, and genre, to increasingly specific lists such as “best books that should be made into movies” or even the “best grocery budgeting books.” Meanwhile an

¹¹ See “About Goodreads” for statistical information from the company’s website, which can be found at <http://www.goodreads.com/about/us>.

ongoing list called the “best books ever” allows anyone on the site to add books or to vote on what they believe to be the best books ever written. So far the list includes 29,570 books and has been voted on by 114,228 viewers, even as the site’s commenters continue to argue over the book selections.

Goodreads therefore provides an especially intriguing and data-filled look into the popular book selections and reading expectations of modern day readers. We can note, for example, that through sites like Goodreads, the Internet, so often blamed for bringing about the demise of books and traditional reading practices, has allowed more readers than ever before to both create their own reading lists and to continue to debate book selections as they have done for hundreds of years. Further, on Goodreads, members add “Friends,” share their book lists, and discuss judgments of “best” and “worst” books, all in a publically visible, print-based medium that can spread to anyone or anywhere. In doing so the site helps to demonstrate how reading guides have been continuously created and used by readers not only to navigate an excess of books or to set moral or value-based standards on literature, but to foster conversations and community identities between readers as well. These types of public networking sites for readers can therefore continue to be explored for how they bring likeminded readers into dialogues about book selection, whether to discuss and imagine small communities of online forums or national literary identities.

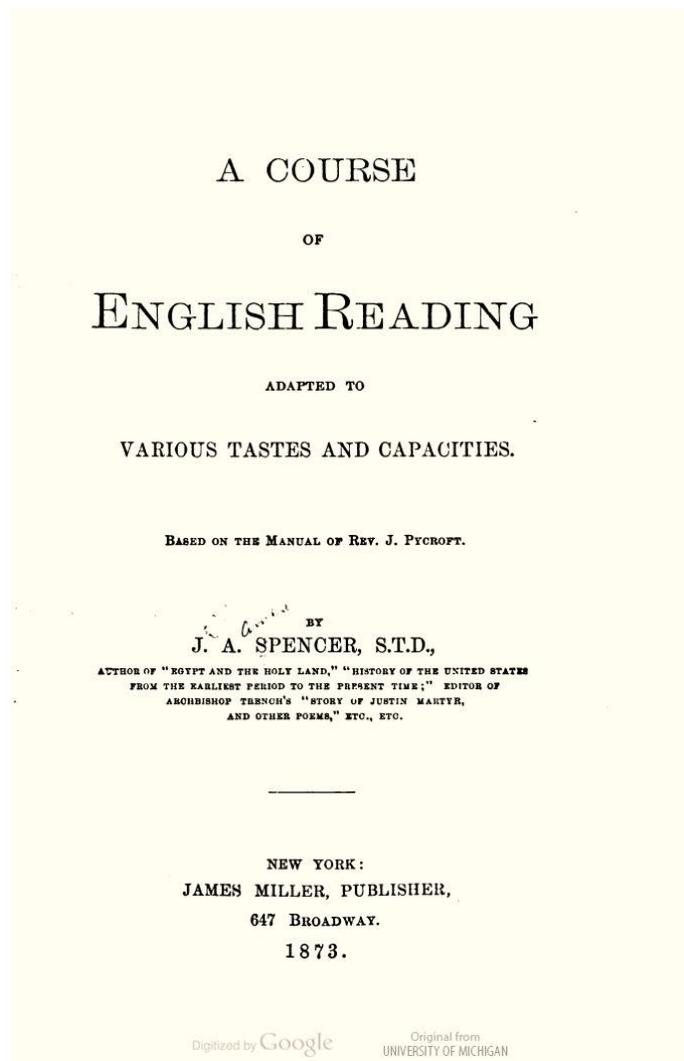
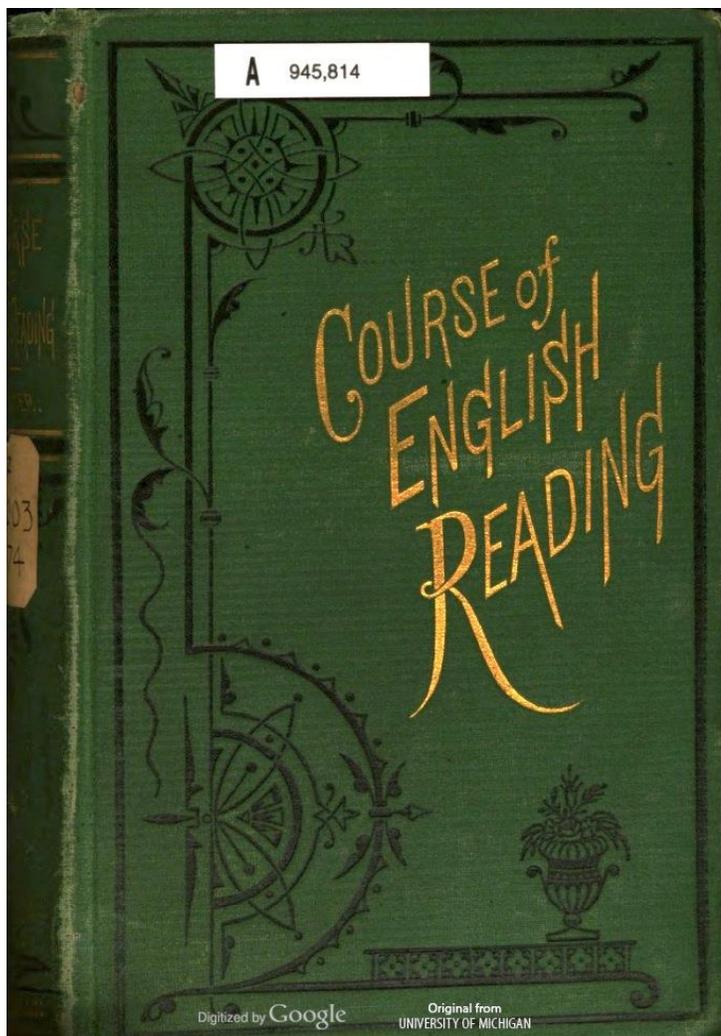
By raising awareness about late nineteenth century reading guides and their contributions toward understandings of public literary identities in the past, this project has, therefore, attempted to lay out new avenues for study by which we can trace a longstanding history of reading guides down to their continued influence and growth in the present day. My research has shown how late nineteenth century guides continue to illuminate larger reading trends and

dichotomies, such as the tension between the expanding community identity reading guides have long sought to unite and the ultimate fragmentation and individualization of their pursuit. As questions regarding the future of reading practices and what a technology-fueled reading identity will look like become ever more of a concern in today's society, such understandings of these ongoing trends and tensions in reading, which have survived late nineteenth century reading guides into the present, help to lay a foundation of assurance. They confirm to modern readers that the positives and negatives of the fate of reading and of literary identity in the Internet age are not new, but part of a larger trend that has existed throughout American literary history.

Appendix

[Fig. 1]

Example of a Reading Guide:
Front Cover and Title Page of J.A. Spencer's Revised *Course of English Reading*



[Fig. 2]

Pall Mall Gazette "Extra" No. 24

FORTIETH THOUSAND.

THE *Sketch Library*
IV. 2249

BEST HUNDRED BOOKS:

21-1-1909

CONTAINING AN ARTICLE ON THE CHOICE OF BOOKS BY
MR. JOHN RUSKIN,
A hitherto Unpublished Letter by
THOMAS CARLYLE,
And Contributions from

<p>H.R.H. THE PRINCE OF WALES. MR. W. E. GLADSTONE, M.P. (with fac- simile note). MR. J. CHAMBERLAIN, M.P. SIR JOHN LUBBOCK, M.P. MR. JOHN RUSKIN (with facsimile list). THE LORD CHIEF JUSTICE OF ENGLAND. GENERAL VISCOUNT WOLSELEY. THE CHIEF LIBRARIAN OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM. THE HEAD MASTER OF ETON. THE HEAD MASTER OF HARROW. ARCHDEACON FARRAR.</p>	<p>PROFESSOR MAX MÜLLER. PROFESSOR BRYCE, M.P. PROFESSOR J. S. BLACKIE. HIS EXCELLENCY THE AMERICAN MINISTER. MISS BRADDON. MR. A. C. SWINBURNE. MR. WILKIE COLLINS. MR. HENRY IRVING. MR. H. M. STANLEY. MR. F. C. BURNAND. MR. WILLIAM MORRIS. And many Others.</p>
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Choose well, your choice is
Brief but yet endless.—CARLYLE, *after Goethe.*

True books have been written in all ages by their greatest men: by great leaders,
great statesmen, and great thinkers. These are all at your choice and life is
short . . . Will you jostle with the common crowd for earee here, and audience
there, when all the while this eternal Court is open to you, with its society wide
as the world, multitudinous as its days, the chosen, and the mighty, of every place
and time?—RUSKIN: *Sevens and Litter.*

LONDON:
"PALL MALL GAZETTE" OFFICE, 2, NORTHUMBERLAND STREET, STRAND, W.C.

CUPPLES, UPHAM & CO., Agents, Boston.

Pall Mall Gazette "Extra," No. 24.

[Fig. 3]

John Lubbock's reprinted list of "The Hundred Best Books"

In the *Pall Mall Gazette*

4

THE BEST HUNDRED BOOKS.

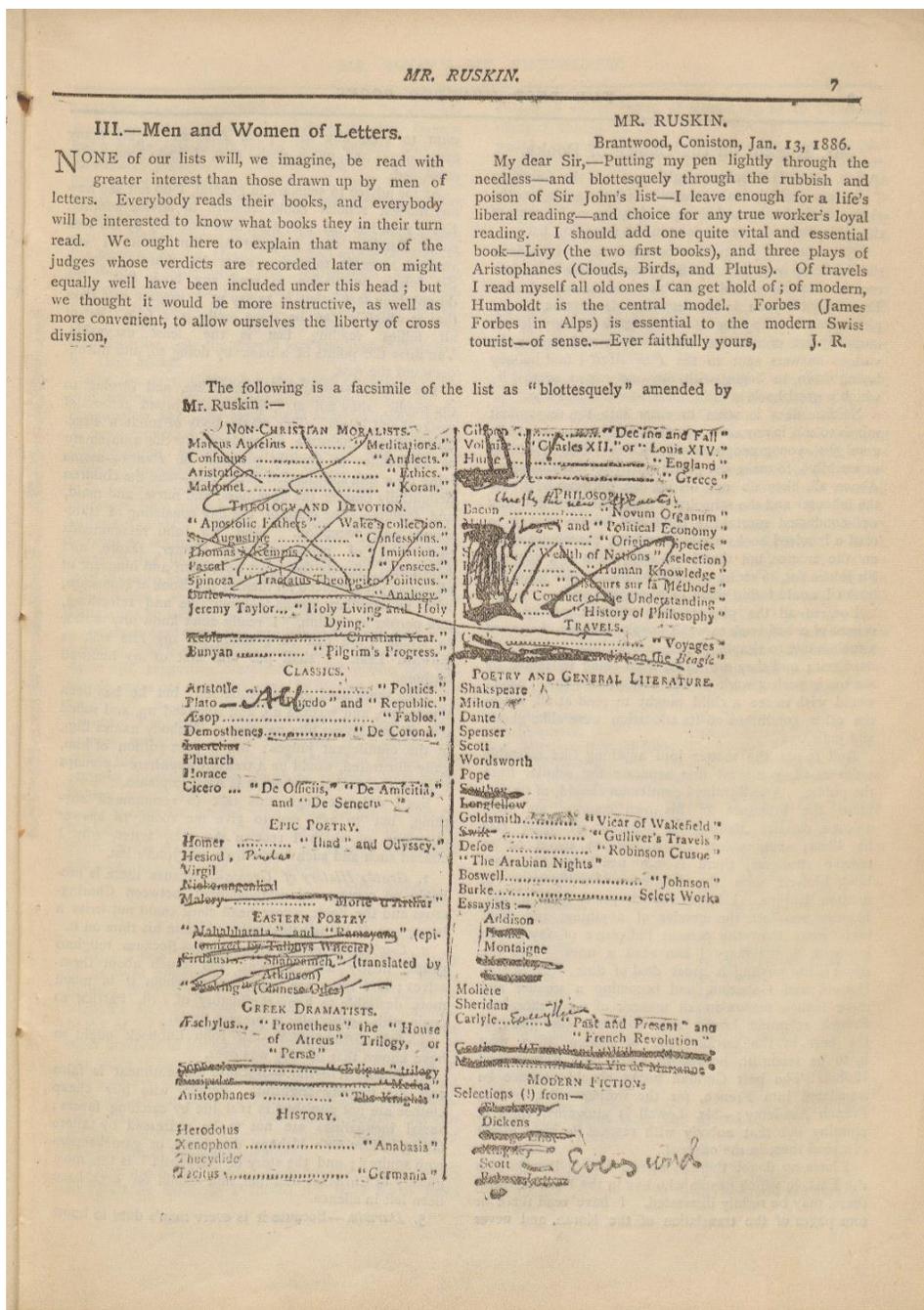
I.—SIR JOHN LUBBOCK'S FIRST LIST.
(As Classified by the *Pall Mall Gazette*, Jan. 11, 1886.)

WE must begin by giving the list which we originally compiled from the report of Sir John Lubbock's lecture, and which formed the basis of the inquiries we addressed to our contributors. It is right, however, to say at once that Sir John Lubbock (to whose uniform courtesy we have been greatly indebted) wrote soon after our list had been published that he did not in his lecture mention quite the whole Hundred Best Books, of which he subsequently gave a complete list in the *Contemporary Review*. "I did, however," he added, "recommend 'Don Quixote' and Epictetus. I shall be glad also if you will allow me to observe that I excluded (1) works by living authors, (2) science, and (3) history, with a very few exceptions which I mentioned rather in their literary aspect."

NON-CHRISTIAN MORALISTS.		Voltaire	{ "Charles XII.," "or "Louis XIV."
Marcus Aurelius	"Meditations.	Hume	"England."
Confucius	"Analects."	Grote	"Greece."
Aristotle	"Ethics."		
Mahomet	"Koran."	PHILOSOPHY.	
THEOLOGY AND DEVOTION.		Bacon	"Novum Organum."
"Apostolic Fathers"	Wake's Collection.	Mill	{ "Logic," "Political Economy."
St. Augustine	"Confessions."	Darwin	"Origin of Species."
Thomas à Kempis	"Imitation."	Smith	"Wealth of Nations" (selection).
Pascal	"Pensées."	Berkeley	"Human Knowledge."
Spinoza	"Tractatus Theologico-Politicus."	Descartes	"Discours sur la Méthode."
Butler	"Analogy."	Locke	"Conduct of the Understanding."
Jeremy Taylor	"Holy Living and Holy Dying."	Lewis	"History of Philosophy."
Keble	"Christian Year."	TRAVELS.	
Bunyan	"Pilgrim's Progress."	Cook	"Voyages."
CLASSICS.		Darwin	"Naturalist on the <i>Beagle</i> ."
Aristotle	"Politics."	POETRY AND GENERAL LITERATURE.	
Plato	{ "Phædo," "Republic."	Shakspeare.	
Æsop	"Fables."	Milton.	
Demosthenes	"De Coronâ."	Dante.	
Lucretius.		Spenser.	
Plutarch.		Scott.	
Horace.		Wordsworth.	
Cicero	{ "De Officiis," "De Amicitia," "De Senectute."	Pope.	
EPIC POETRY.		Southey.	
Homer	"Iliad" and "Odyssey."	Longfellow.	
Hesiod.		Goldsmith	"Vicar of Wakefield."
Virgil.		Swift	"Gulliver's Travels."
Nibelungenlied.		Defoe	"Robinson Crusoe."
Malory	"Morte d'Arthur."	"The Arabian Nights."	
EASTERN POETRY.		Boswell	"Johnson."
"Mahabharata"	{ Epitomized by Talboys Wheeler.	Burke	Select Works.
"Ramayana"		Essayists:—	
Firdausi	"Shahnameh" (Translated by Atkinson).	Addison.	
"Sheking" (Chinese Odes).		Hume.	
GREEK DRAMATISTS.		Montaigne.	
Æschylus	{ "Prometheus," "House of Atreus," Trilogy, or "Persæ."	Macaulay.	
Sophocles	"Cædipus" Trilogy.	Emerson.	
Euripides	"Medea."	Molière.	
Aristophanes	"The Knights."	Sheridan.	
HISTORY.		Carlyle	{ "Past and Present," "French Revolution."
Herodotus.		Goethe	{ "Faust," "Wilhelm Meister."
Xenophon	"Anabasis."	Marivaux	"La Vie de Marianne."
Thucydides.		MODERN FICTION.	
Tacitus	"Germania."	Selections from—	
Gibbon	"Decline and Fall."	Thackeray.	
		Dickens.	
		George Eliot.	
		Kingsley.	
		Scott.	
		Bulwer Lytton.	

[Fig. 4]

John Ruskin's Revisions of Lubbock's List



DISTRIBUTION OF THE BEST LITERATURE.

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TABLE V.

Plato Aristotle Demosthenes	400		Alexander The Gauls burn Rome
	300		Wars of Rome against Carthage Hannibal in Italy
	200		Greece becomes a Roman Province ROME The Gracchi, Marius, and Sylla
ROME. AUGUSTAN AGE, 31 B. C TO A. D. 14. Reatinus Ovid Sallust Livy Cicero Lucretius Virgil	100		ROME Julius Cæsar Pompey Civil War, Empire established
Plutarch Tacitus Juvenal Pliny	A. D.	Josephus	Jerusalem taken by Titus Pompeii overwhelmed Romans conquer Britain
Epictetus Marcus Aurelius	100		Church Fathers
	200		Aurelian conquers Zenobia

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	300		Under Constantine Christianity becomes the State religion Roman Empire divided
	400		Angles and Saxons drive out the Britons Huns under Attila invade the Roman Empire
	500		Christianity carried to England by Augustine
ENGLISH LITERATURE Cædmon	600	ARABIA Mahomet	
Bæda Cynewulf	700		FRANCE Charlemagne founds the Empire of the West
Ælfred, 850-900	800		Danes overrun England <i>Ælfred's glorious reign</i>
	900		Chivalry begins Capetian kings in France ENGLAND Saint Dunstan Papal supremacy

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			1000	PERSIA Firdusi's Shah Nameh	ENGLAND Canute the Great 1066. <i>Norman Conquest</i> Peter the Hermit First Crusade
Geoffrey of Monmouth			1100	PERSIA Omar Khayyám GERMANY Nibelungenlied SPAIN Chronicle of the Cid	ENGLAND Plantagenets Richard I. FRANCE Second and Third Crusades Saint Bernard
Layamon Roger Bacon			1200	PERSIA Saadi	ENGLAND 1215. Runnymede, Magna Charta Edward I.
Mandeville Langland Wycliffe Gower	Chaucer		1300	ITALY Dante Petrarch Boccaccio PERSIA Hafiz	ENGLAND Chivalry at its height The Black Prince <i>Gunpowder</i> FRANCE Battles of Crecy, Poitiers, and Agincourt
Lydgate Fortescue Malory			1400	GERMANY Thomas à Kemp- pis Arabian Nights (probably) PERSIA Jami	ENGLAND Henry VIII. shook off the Pope <i>Movable Types</i> <i>Discovery of America</i> Joan of Arc Wars of the Roses
More Lyly Sidney Marlowe Spenser	Ascham Sackville Fox Hooker		1500	ITALY Ariosto Tasso Galileo FRANCE Montaigne	<i>Copernicus</i> <i>Kepler</i> <i>The Armada</i> ENGLAND Henry VIII., Elizabeth GERMANY 1515. <i>Luther's Reformation</i> FRANCE Massacre of St. Bartholomew
Jonson Shakespeare Chapman Beaumont & Fletcher Milton Bunyan Dryden	Bacon Newton Locke Pepys	Herbert J. Taylor Hobbes Walton S. Butler S. Butler	1600	SPAIN. Cervantes Calderon GERMANY. Kepler FRANCE. Descartes Corneille Racine Molière La Fontaine	1620. Plymouth Rock and the "Mayflower" 1649 <i>Cromwell</i> 1660 Restoration 1688 Revolution William and Mary FRANCE. Louis XIV.

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TABLE V.

Addison Steele Pope Defoe Swift Berkeley J. Butler Moore Thomson Young Gray Goldsmith Sterne	Cowper Burns Rugers Hume Edwards A. Smith Bentham Gibbon Johuson Boswell Malthus Mackintosh Paine	Otis Jay Adams Hamilton Madison Jefferson Pitt Burke Fox Erskine P. Henry.	1700	FRANCE Montesquieu Le Sage Rousseau Voltaire GERMANY Munchausen Lessing	1776. American Revolution 1789-94. French Revolution ENGLAND Marlborough
Scott Byron Bryant Drake Wordsworth Keats Shelley Payne Keble Halleck Key Macaulay Hood Poe Read Tennyson Browning Lowell Longfellow Carleton Ingelow Whittier Mill Spencer Ruskin Arnold Curtis Holmes Mansel Carlyle Emerson Darwin Huxley Dana Tyndall Lubbock Proctor Davy Proctor Davy Bright Fiske Curtin Hale Edwards	Herschel Whewell Ricardo Carey Faraday Lyell Agassiz Whitney A. Gray Hallam Prescott Lewes Milman Buckle Merivale Hildreth Freeman Draper Froude Walpole Lecky Parkman Bancroft Whipple Twain Jerrold Choate Lincoln Phillips Everett Sumner Garfield Gladstone A. D. White Beecher P. Brooks Lamb Hazlitt Dodge Lamb Hazlitt Rives Aldrich Warner Curtis Higginson	DeQuincey Whately Jeffrey Brougham S. Smith C. North N. Webster H. H. White D. Webster Sparks Story Gould Cooper Disraeli Dickens Thackeray Brontë Hawthorne Irving Hughes Kingsley Eliot Collins Macdonald Hunt Wallace Clarke Landon Tourgée Holland Howells Mrs. Whitney Miss Alcott Bellamy Gronlund Gilman Holley Dodge Jewett Burroughs Stowe Hearn Burnett	1800	GERMANY Schiller Goethe Kant Fichte Hegel Schelling Niebuhr Schlosser Heine Haeckel Helmholtz Grimm Froebel FRANCE La Place Guizot De Tocqueville Comte Hugo Balzac Renan Taine RUSSIA Pushkin Lermontoff DENMARK Andersen Dumas RUSSIA Pushkin Lermontoff Bashkirtseff DENMARK Andersen POLAND Sienkiewicz	1807. Fulton's Steamboat Wellington 1815. Waterloo 1815. White wives sold in England 1830. Passenger railway 1833. Matches 1844. Telegraph 1845. Mexican War 1860. Rebellion 1863. Emancipation 1870. Franco-German War 1874. The Telephone Emancipation of serfs in Russia
			1900		

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[free/pdf?res=F20B14FC3F5C11738DDDA0894D1405B8885F0D3](http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=F20B14FC3F5C11738DDDA0894D1405B8885F0D3)> [accessed Oct 2013].

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