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Helen Chambers, *Conrad's Reading: Space, Time, Networks*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
ISBN: 978-3-319-76486-3.

Robert Darnton in his famed "Communications Circuit" draws a dotted line that links the Reader back to the Author. Although putatively closing the loop, the link is not absolute: not all consumers of books are also producers of books, but writers are without fail readers. Darnton's final link thus encapsulates a small, but important, sub-section within the history of reading: the study of a writers' libraries.

With *Conrad's Reading: Space, Time, Networks*, Helen Chambers makes a very valuable contribution to this field. In this book, she explores Joseph Conrad's reading habits as they unfolded themselves throughout his peripatetic life, across languages and geographical space at sea and on land. Looking at "the changing temporal and spatial patterns" (5) of his reading, Chambers investigates in extensive detail the *what*, *where* and *when* Conrad read – the books and reading materials he had access to or possessed – and connects these with the *why* and *how* he read, as well as (intriguingly) the *with whom*. The emphasis throughout this book is on reading as a social activity, as Chambers explores the exchanges between Conrad and the men and women in his circle about reading. So while the prime focus of this study is to situate Conrad's reading with "the reading cultures of continental Europe and of Britain and its empire" (5) of the time, Chambers also, to a degree, adds further insight to these cultures.

In the best of cases, the surviving personal library of writers is never complete; it is usually only a snapshot of the books they had accumulated at a given moment in their life. With Conrad, always a voracious reader, the recorded evidence of his reading is patchy. This is in no small part due to his itinerant existence. Even when he had settled down after his marriage in 1896, he lived at eight different addresses in London, Kent, Essex and France, which is not conducive to keeping one's books together. In addition to the books now preserved at the Canterbury Heritage Museum, it is possible to reconstruct Conrad's virtual library from the books mentioned in the catalogue and auctioneer's notes of the Hodgson sale (1925), and in correspondence, memoirs and some other sources. (Chambers was able to rely here on the substantial earlier work done by David Tutein, Hans van Marle and Owen Knowles.) The analysis of these records constitutes what Chambers names (using Katie Halsey's memorable phrase) "reading the evidence of reading" (7). Besides these tangible sources, Chambers also draws on less tangible evidence with a view to reconstructing Conrad's reading from his Polish childhood and sea years linking quite ephemeral evidence, including the texts mentioned and representations of reading in the fiction, to what is known about the availability and distribution of reading material in those regions. She calls this giving "bibliographic credibility" to the "putative act of reading" (7).

In six well-researched chapters, Chambers paints an interesting, rich and variegated picture of Conrad's reading. At one end, she drills down into the quantitative data about Conrad's reading using UKRED, the Reading Experience Database hosted by the Open University, which reveals some interesting patterns in his reading habits across time: fiction, for instance, was always the dominant genre, but while the number of titles read nearly doubles after 1900, the relative proportion of fiction drops after that time when he reads more in other genres. At the other end, she examines closely the representation of reading in Conrad's writing, including women readers, thus combining Book History with traditional literary criticism. The argument is that the "compelling immediacy" provided by Conrad's depiction of reading "points convincingly" to the writer's own familiarity with the works being read (20-21); in a sense, also, these depictions furnish greater insight into reading practices in way that book ownership does not always do. To own a book says something about taste

and predilection, but very little about one's reading responses. Conrad, moreover, was not in the habit of annotating his books.

Richly researched, *Conrad's Reading* will not only be of interest to Conrad scholars. One of the issues with writers' libraries is that case studies dominate the research landscape. Focusing on idiosyncrasies of reading and book collecting, these studies are valuable for what they teach us about the author, but little regard is given to widening the critical understanding of the processes of reading. In order to meaningfully close the loop in Darnton's circuit, a new model for the study of writers' libraries is needed that furnishes new, sustained theoretical and methodological considerations of the subject. As a method, Chambers' "interconnected approaches" (43) to analysing Conrad's reading, which aligns the "hard evidence" of reading with data about book production and representations of reading is an important new point of departure for such an undertaking.

Wim Van Mierlo