

The Vicar , the Nobleman, and the Peasant About a Book and its Readers

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Volume 13, Number 1, Spring 2022

L'histoire du livre dans les pays nordiques
Book History in the Nordic Countries

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094125ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1094125ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Groupe de recherches et d'études sur le livre au Québec

ISSN

1920-602X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Hansen, H. (2022). The Vicar , the Nobleman, and the Peasant: About a Book and its Readers. *Mémoires du livre / Studies in Book Culture*, 13(1), 1–30.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1094125ar>

Article abstract

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THE VICAR, THE NOBLEMAN, AND THE PEASANT: About a Book and its Readers¹

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ABSTRACT

This article centres around a volume of sermons and its three documented owners. The book first belonged to a vicar, then to a nobleman, and finally to a farmhand. The three owners all left marks on the book, and the farmhand wrote a remarkable passage on its last page, detailing his reading of the book. The three owners' possession of the book spans over a century, 1766–1876, a period that saw people's reading habits and reading practices transform fundamentally. In this context Sweden, a forerunner in literacy development, constitutes a particularly interesting example. The journey that this book made provides an insight into provincial book culture and reading practices, and also tells us something about the literacy development of the time. Linking the reading practices to socioeconomic status, the article suggests that the habit of rereading lived on among uneducated readers in the countryside for quite some time.

RÉSUMÉ

Le présent article porte sur un recueil de sermons et sur les trois personnes dont on peut attester qu'elles en ont été propriétaires. Le recueil appartient d'abord à un vicaire, puis à un noble et, enfin, à un ouvrier agricole. Ces trois propriétaires y laissèrent des traces, l'ouvrier agricole, notamment, ayant consigné de remarquables notes lecture à la dernière page du livre. À tour de rôle, ils eurent le recueil en leur possession durant plus d'un siècle, de 1766 à 1876, période qui vit les habitudes et pratiques de lecture se transformer en profondeur. La Suède, précurseure en matière de littératie, constitue en cela un exemple particulièrement intéressant. En effet, les « pérégrinations » du recueil donnent à voir quelles étaient la culture du livre et les pratiques de lecture en province, tout comme elles sont révélatrices des progrès sur le plan de la littératie. En établissant des liens entre pratiques de lecture et statut socioéconomique, l'article révèle entre autres que la relecture fut durant longtemps chose courante, à la campagne, chez les lecteurs peu scolarisés.

Keywords

Reading habits, provenance, reading revolution, literacy, early modern book market

Mots-clés

Habitudes de lecture, provenance, révolution de la lecture, littérature, marché du livre au début de l'ère moderne

Years ago, I bought a sturdy 1,500-page octavo volume of sermons, printed in Gothenburg in 1765–66. The short title of the book is *Doct. Johan Tillotsons Utvalda predikningar*, a Swedish translation of a collection of sermons by the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Tillotson (1630–1694).² It was an appealing tome, bound entirely in calf with raised bands, though it was the flyleaves, which bore several inscriptions, that first caught my interest. The inscriptions, fewer than a hundred words in total, consist of previous owners' signatures—fascinating in their own right, since they allow us to trace the book's movements over its first hundred years—and details about each owner's purchase of the volume. There is also a quite remarkable inscription on the last blank page. It was this inscription that convinced me to bid for the book. Carefully and most likely slowly written, almost poetic in its composition, although with a somewhat awkward and archaic Swedish spelling, it reads:

*This is a very
Beautiful and Godly book
One among the very best
I have read, and it is
Now the third time I
Have read her through. And
God give that I may
Live, so I within
A few years yet get to
Read her through.*³

The mere thought of this reader ponderously making his or her way through the heavy tome over and over again enticed me to take a closer look, in an attempt to detect any further traces of reading. I noticed that the spine was

covered in fine cracks: subtle evidence that the book had been read numerous times. There! A dog's ear. There! A couple of fingerprints in ink. And there! Faint pencil lines marking paragraphs and chapters of particular interest to a reader. Everywhere, traces of reading. How many evenings were spent poring over this book, how many hours of reading in poor lighting, after a long day's work?



Figure 1: Tillotson's *Utwalda predikningar*.

Still, an old devotional book, time-stained and worn after passing from one owner to another, is not an unusual thing. Neither are inscriptions and signatures. On the contrary, statements concerning ownership and purchase are often seen. But it is a rare thing to be able to identify the owners, and still rarer to see someone describing their reading of the book. Evidently, this book contained more stories than its printed text alone could tell.

Ian Jackson has stressed that the reading experiences we are able to study are rarely representative, and he has urged scholars to “seek evidence for the experiences of those whose reading experiences were not considered worth commenting on and being documented by their contemporaries.”⁴ The inscription on the last page of the Tillotson book is an example of such evidence, which naturally warrants closer scrutiny. This article offers, through a micro-historical lens, a glimpse of reading culture and reading practices in Sweden in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, using the book of sermons and the traces left in it by its owners as an example.

The Reading Revolution Debate

Although the statement on the last page of the book is interesting in its own right, and, like any reader’s experience of a certain text, unique, it can be seen in light of contemporaneous literary practices. In other words, those modest lines can tell us something of the *modus operandi* of reading at a given time and place, and within a given socio-economic context. So, how does the reader’s testimony relate to general perceptions about reading at this specific time? Was this reader in any way anomalous? And what other kinds of books might he or she have had access to?

An increased availability of reading materials, as well as new institutions for reading, such as reading societies and circulating libraries, went hand in hand with an expansion of the reading public and a fundamental transformation of reading habits, often described as a “reading revolution.” The practice of intensive reading gradually gave way to the modern habit of extensive reading, characterized by “skimming and skipping, devouring and discarding.”⁵ Instead of reading the same texts repeatedly, readers would plough through new books rather quickly, consuming literature in a completely different manner and at a faster pace than ever before.

Ever since it was first put forward by Rolf Engelsing in the 1970s, however, the theory of a general transformation from intensive to extensive reading has been subject to debate. While some historians argue that the reading revolution in Western countries was an eighteenth-century phenomenon, others point out that European literacy rates at the time were low. Engelsing, who argues that the reading revolution took place in the late eighteenth century, based his research on German sources.⁶ However, it

should be noted that Engelsing studied predominately a particular group of urban readers, namely the burghers of Bremen, who were not necessarily representative of the German population in general. Rough estimates suggest that not more than around a fifth of the German population was able to read by the end of the eighteenth century.⁷ So is it even justifiable to talk about a reading revolution in a society where not more than one in five was able to read? According to Reinhard Wittmann, it was not until the nineteenth century that a “truly numerical or quantitative democratization of reading” was able to take place.⁸ And while Robert Darnton acknowledges the important changes in the book market during the late eighteenth century, he too argues that the reading revolution occurred later, during the nineteenth century, and that the expanding literacy rates and cheap mass published reading material were particularly significant to driving the transformation.⁹

The fact that literacy statistics from the eighteenth century are notoriously unreliable adds a layer of uncertainty to the whole reading revolution debate. According to Wittmann, there is really only one true exception when it comes to literacy data from the time: Sweden. Naturally, this makes Sweden a particularly interesting case for studying reading practices, not least since most studies of the reading revolution thus far have been based on data from continental Europe and America.

Literacy Development and Book Availability in Sweden, c. 1600–1850

As Charlotte Appel has pointed out, the Swedish language has no single word for *literacy* but rather uses the two terms *läskunnighet* [reading ability] and *skrivkunnighet* [writing ability].¹⁰ The political and religious initiatives to further the education of common people in Sweden during the early modern period emphasized the ability to read. Meanwhile, the ability to write lagged behind.¹¹

Basic reading skills were widespread in Sweden sooner than almost anywhere else in the world. In 1833, the Swedish statistician Carl af Forsell boldly asserted that “there is not one in a thousand among the Swedish peasantry who cannot read.”¹² Similarly, the Swedish physician Carl Johan Hartman stated in 1830 that “a full-grown person who cannot read is so rarely seen that he or she is regarded almost as a heathen.”¹³

Thanks to detailed records from so-called household examinations, which were conducted by vicars across the country, it has been possible to establish that the reading ability among the Swedish population was indeed already high in the early modern period among men and women alike. Most readers, it should be noted, only possessed a rudimentary and religiously oriented level of reading, all in line with the expectations of the authorities. For Swedish people learning how to read at this time, religious texts constituted both a means and an end.¹⁴

The purpose of the household examinations was, among other things, to check the reading ability of every member of the household. Egil Johansson's ground-breaking studies of literacy in early modern Sweden have shown that the ability to read became commonplace in the seventeenth century and that literacy rates accelerated during the eighteenth century, independent of formal schooling. Using preserved household examination rolls, the oldest from as early as the late 1620s, Johansson was able to study how children were transitioning from the oral to the written culture and were learning how to read. Broadly, the household examinations allow us to study literacy development in detail and to see at what age children were able to "read in book," as the vicars put it—that is, at what age they could read the ABC primer.¹⁵

Over the course of the seventeenth century, the proportion of literates increased significantly, and the process was accelerated by the 1686 church law, which stipulated that everyone should be able to read the words of God.¹⁶ David Vincent goes as far as to call the 1686 church law "the earliest effective piece of school legislation,"¹⁷ which is telling of its significance. The law did not make school mandatory but rather stressed the responsibility of the fathers in each household.¹⁸ Part of the ingenuity of the law lies in the fact that, in effect, it prevented illiterates from entering the state of marriage, which proved to have considerable motivational force.¹⁹

By the time the collection of sermons was printed in Gothenburg, most Swedes were able to read, regardless of socioeconomic status. But was Sweden thereby a nation of readers? Far from it, it would seem. The widespread ability to read, even among the common people, did not mean that people in general were reading books on a more regular basis. Reading materials were still out of most people's reach, and for those lacking in

means, the decisive changes occurred only later, in the nineteenth century. Moreover, literacy rates did not necessarily grow in a linear fashion. Household examinations suggest that, in some cases, adults may even have lost their childhood ability to read, due to a lack of reading materials on which to practice their skills.²⁰

For a long time, the Swedish book market was underdeveloped, and by the end of the eighteenth century it was still concentrated in the largest cities in Sweden: Stockholm, Gothenburg, and the university towns of Uppsala and Lund. The countryside, where over 90 percent of the population lived, remained dependent on an informal and seasonal book market, characterized by book auctions and itinerant book peddlers, and there was a significant and persistent shortage of books. As a consequence, books were most likely reread much more intensively in the countryside than in the cities.

Indeed, books remained expensive and were printed in small editions well into the nineteenth century. Because books were relatively inaccessible, people formed reading societies and borrowed books from the commercial lending libraries, which flourished in the aftermath of the so-called “iron years” of the rule of King Gustav IV Adolf (1792–1809), when there had been a crackdown on the free press and on literary institutions.²¹ Since reading societies and lending libraries remained largely an urban phenomenon, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that the more significant changes in the book market occurred: changes which little by little would democratize access to books.

These changes included falling book prices and larger print runs, which in turn facilitated the development of more commercial lending libraries. Cheap literary series that were launched in the 1830s and 1840s brought fiction within reach of a heterogeneous group of readers.²² Meanwhile, the Elementary School Act of 1842 formalized schooling and called for the development of public libraries. And although parish libraries had gotten off to a slow start, by the mid-1850s they saw a boom period that supported the democratization of access to books, not least for readers of limited means. At the same time, the press experienced significant growth, in both numbers and print runs, and managed to attract readers from a wide and expanding social spectrum.

The Book and its Owners

Now, back to where we started—the collection of Tillotson’s sermons and its three known owners. The book was originally published in five parts, but only parts two, three, and four are included in this volume. On the pastedown endpaper, the first owner has made some annotations regarding the price of the volume, and here we can see that the purchase comprised two volumes. The two volumes were bought on October 29, 1766, the same year that the fourth part of the book was printed. It remains uncertain where the volumes were bought, but we know how much the buyer paid for them: 16 Swedish silver daler. A substantial amount, this was well beyond what most people could afford. It remains uncertain when and where the two volumes were separated.

The first owner of the book was Magnus Laurentii Hedén, a clergyman who descended from a family of clerics and military officers. He was born in 1743, in Västra Emtervik in the rural province of Värmland, in Midwest Sweden, far away from the closest bookshop. At the time he bought the book, he was twenty-three years old and a newly ordained vicar, living in the university town of Uppsala.²³ It might well be here that he bought the book. A couple of years later, he was appointed assistant vicar [*komminister*] of the parish of Norra Råda, some 30 kilometres from where he grew up. He married Elisabeth Maria Friberg, the daughter of another *komminister*, and they had six children. Hedén died in July 1793, 55 years old. When he died, the book was not passed on to any of the children. Instead, as was common practice, it was sold at auction.

Hedén did not write his full name in the book, only Magn. Hedén, and neither did he add any other helpful information with regard to his whereabouts. Thus, it would have been hard to identify him, had it not been for the second owner of the book, Johan Eberhard von Rappholt, who had a unique name and furthermore carefully recorded the essentials regarding his purchase on the pastedown endpaper. “Bought at auction after Hedén in 1794.” Was there a Magnus Hedén in the vicinity of where von Rappholt lived? Yes, indeed. Thanks to the church records from Norra Råda, where von Rappholt had lived, Hedén was easily found, and we could see that he had passed away in the year preceding von Rappholt’s purchase of the book.

The second owner crossed out Hedén's name and put his own name below it, thereby inscribing himself in the line of owners. He paid two riksdaler for the volume, or the volumes, which is equivalent of 12 silver daler. In other words, the book cost only four daler less than what Hedén gave when he first bought the books almost 30 years earlier, which indicates just how expensive and rare books were at the time; not even second-hand books were necessarily affordable. Again, we do not know when the volume containing part one went missing, but it may well have been included in von Rappholt's purchase, since the price remained high.

Johan Eberhard von Rappholt was born in 1756 on the estate of Risberg, situated in the very parish where Hedén would later serve as *komminister*. He was a member of an old noble family from Silesia, who had moved to Sweden during the era of the Swedish Empire to avoid persecution due to their Lutheran faith. In his youth, von Rappholt served at the Swedish court as a pageboy to the future King Gustav III. Destined for a military career, he eventually became a lieutenant serving with the Regiment of Närke-Värmland, but he was dismissed in 1788 due to illness. Von Rappholt never married, and none of his siblings ever produced a male heir. When he passed away in 1834, his line became extinct.²⁴

Hedén and von Rappholt each left a few traces in the book. One of the owners, possibly Hedén, who would have made professional use of the book, marked the top edge of the text block with numbers two, three, and four, corresponding to the book's different sections. Apparently, this user looked to the book for reference rather than to read it cover to cover, and the numbers would have allowed the user to navigate quickly among the three different parts. Less usefully, someone managed to make a series of clumsy fingerprints in ink on the first few pages. Von Rappholt wrote his initials carefully on the first title page. Remnants of a red wax seal on the flyleaf may well have displayed the von Rappholt family crest.

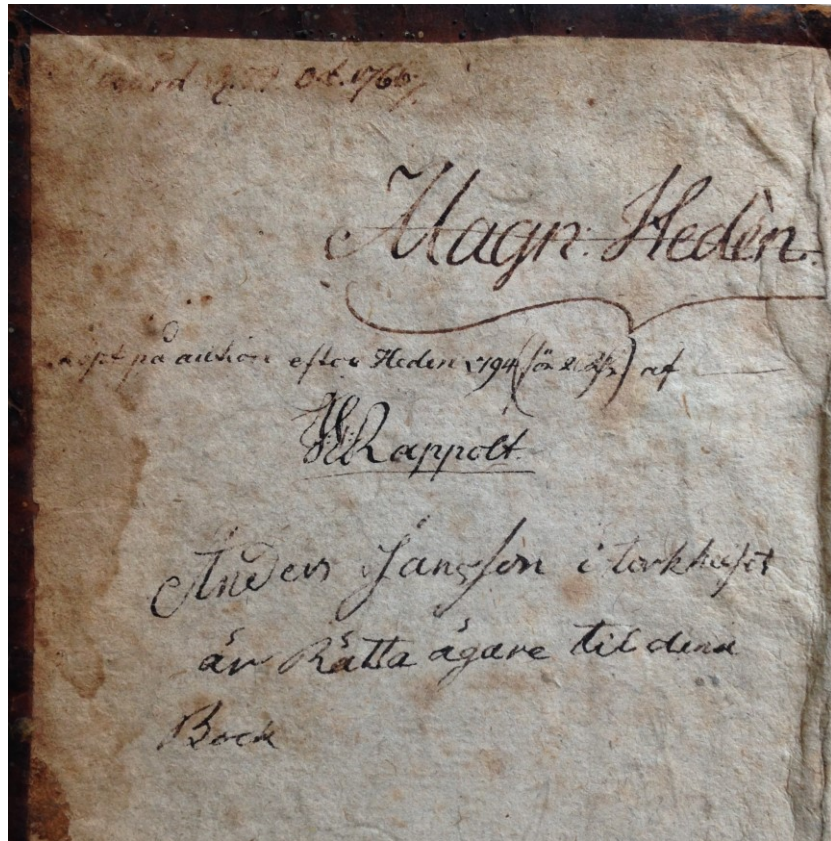


Figure 2: Pastedown endpaper with the signatures of the three owners.

The third owner's name can be found on the pastedown endpaper, written boldly below Hedén's and von Rappholt's signatures. Here, it is proudly stated, "Anders Jansson in Torkhuset is the rightful owner of this book." In his excitement, Jansson even managed to misspell the word "book" [Swedish: "bok"], so instead it reads "bock," which in Swedish means "goat." Someone with the name Anders Jansson—a very common first name followed by a patronymic—would normally have been quite difficult to track down. Fortunately, Jansson also mentioned that he lived in a place called Torkhuset. As it happens, there is a place called Torkhuset in the very parish where Hedén had been a *komminister*, and where the Risberg estate was also situated: Torkhuset in Norra Råda. The church records confirm that an Anders Jansson lived in one of the houses in Torkhuset at precisely the right time. They also confirm that the same Jansson eventually moved to a place called Björkåsberg. This is the name of the place where Jansson, according to his own notes, wrote the last statement in the book, which removes any remaining doubt.

Torkhuset was a tiny place, consisting of only a handful of small houses at the time Jansson lived there. He was born in 1796, the son of a crofter. Jansson would eventually become a crofter himself, after working for a number of years as a farmhand on nearby farms. When it entered Jansson's possession, the collection of sermons took a big step down the social ladder. After belonging to a vicar, then to a member of the nobility who had been in the service of the king, it now found itself in the hands of one who represented the lower segment of the population, a common man. The book ending up in the hands of a crofter illustrates the trickle-down nature of the book market, where books belonging to the upper classes slowly made their way down the echelons of society, sometimes directly, from book owner to book owner, and sometimes taking a detour via libraries, often thanks to book donations from affluent patrons.

Jansson's proud statement on the first page of the book, about being its rightful owner, suggests that he did not own many other books at the time. We can of course only speculate about how the book got into his hands. We know that Jansson moved away from Torkhuset in 1820, which means that he must have been fairly young when he acquired the volume, no more than 20 years old or so. Did he already, at such young age, have enough money to buy it? The date of Jansson's departure also tells us that von Rappholt must have parted with the book before he died. Why would he do so? According to the parish register from Norra Råda, von Rappholt moved from the family estate to nearby Sunnemo in 1815.²⁵ Perhaps it was on this occasion that von Rappholt got rid of the book, and it subsequently entered Jansson's possession.

But in what ways would a theological and ponderous tome such as this appeal to a reader of Anders Jansson's standing? The author of the book, Archbishop Tillotson, was a popular preacher throughout Protestant Europe in his time.²⁶ He was a highly renowned theologian, but also a liberal preacher. His sermons have been described as popular, albeit "dry and philosophical."²⁷ Middle-class churchgoers appreciated Tillotson's sermons, in any case, and even Voltaire is said to have been among his admirers.²⁸

The Swedish translation of Tillotson's book contains sermons offering advice on everyday situations, relevant to readers regardless of social standing. However, while Tillotson was known for adapting his sermons to

his audience, the text is full of footnotes and references to other theologians and biblical passages, apparently aimed at clerics rather than laymen. It also includes a number of lengthy quotes in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Significant parts of the text must consequently have been lost on Jansson. It is a voluminous tome, over 1,500 pages, and far from a light read. Despite all this, Jansson allegedly read the book at least three times, and his use of the verb *genomläsa* [“read through”] implies that he read it cover to cover. In Jansson’s possession, then, the book most likely served a different purpose than it had done as part of Hedén’s and von Rappholt’s libraries. For instance, someone, perhaps Jansson himself, marked an entire five-page section on the dangers of using profanities. This may well have had a particular relevance for the inhabitants of Norra Råda. The Welsh naturalist Llewelyn Lloyd (1792–1876), who spent a number of years in the region during the 1820s researching his book *Field Sports of the North of Europe* (1827–28), was appalled by the widespread use of profanities among the inhabitants, and also noted other less flattering traits, such as excessive drinking and a widespread superstition.²⁹ Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing if Jansson would agree with Lloyd’s observations, or if the description would apply to him.

What kind of reader was Jansson, and what spurred his interest in reading? The household examination rolls in the meticulously kept parish records from his home parish reveal how Jansson’s reading skills developed over the years. At the age of eight, it was reported that he could “read in book,” that is, he knew his primer. At twelve, he could read the catechism. A few years later, he had reached the next level: he now “understands what he reads,” the vicar noted. In 1816, at the age of twenty, Jansson read Svebelius’ explanation of Luther’s catechism.³⁰ No more was expected from the son of a crofter.³¹

Like most children at the time, Jansson was presumably home-schooled. Although his home diocese was something of a forerunner in terms of education—schools were established here well before the 1842 Public School Act was ratified³²—this development came a little too late to benefit Jansson, who, nonetheless, seems to have acquired the necessary skills. Jansson was able to read, and he evidently also knew how to write. His spelling may not have been perfect, but he was quite capable of expressing

himself in writing. By the time he acquired the volume with Tillotson's sermons, he was a fully literate man.

Jansson's estate inventory, compiled following his death in 1876, has fortunately been preserved. The inventory spans four pages and lists all of Jansson's possessions and their estimated value. Kitchenware, tools, clothes, linens, wool, furniture, livestock, and cash amounted to a total value of 1,274 kronor and 65 öre: a handsome sum. On the last page of the inventory Jansson's books are accounted for: a postil and a bible valued at 3 kronor 50 öre, and a book of daily devotional readings, as well as "various books of several kinds," valued altogether at 8 kronor. It seems safe to assume that the copy of Tillotson's sermons was lumped in with the "various books." Since it was already an old book by then, its economic value was not deemed sufficiently high for the title to be mentioned. Jansson's book collection as a whole was nonetheless estimated to hold a certain value—almost as much as his four sheep, in fact, just shy of 50 öre.³³

By the end of his life, then, Jansson was the owner of a small library. The fact that a landless peasant such as Jansson would own a book collection may come as a surprise, but it is consistent with a statement by af Forsell from 1833, which touches upon book ownership among the Swedish peasantry: "Even ... the cottage of the farmer or the crofter [will] ... nearly always contain a hymnbook, a Bible, a collection of sermons, and sometimes several other devotional manuals."³⁴ Later studies have found af Forsell's statement surprisingly well-founded. Studies of estate inventories indicate that these kinds of books, especially the catechism and the hymnbook, were becoming increasingly common in Lutheran homes over the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.³⁵ The postil, a devotional book with sermons or biblical passages intended for domestic use, was also a common possession. Lloyd has also remarked on the presence of books in most homes in Norra Råda. Some of these were probably distributed by the church, which handed out dozens of bibles, hymnbooks, prayer books, catechisms, and ABC primers to the parishioners.³⁶ By the mid-1800s, a cleric in Norra Råda, J. J. Stawe, noted that either the New Testament or complete Bibles could be found in almost every home.³⁷

A library consisting of only a handful of volumes may seem insubstantial to us now, but peasant book owners at the time likely felt differently.

Inscribing his name in the Tillotson book was most certainly an important moment for Jansson, and to be able to claim ownership of a book as early as 1820 was, for someone in Jansson's standing, obviously noteworthy. Owning a single book could mean more to some people than owning a thousand books meant to others. Holbrook Jackson even has a name for this class of book owners: "single book devotees."³⁸ There is a mildly mocking tone in this epithet, and when compared to professional book collectors, these humble book owners are easily overlooked. But the amount of attention and interest others gave to a whole book collection, they could devote to a single book, and if we read between the lines in Jansson's testimony, the inscription exudes an unmistakable feeling of pride and contentment.

Detta är En mycket
Wacker och gudelig bok
En med de aldra bästa
jag Läst, och dett är
Nu tredje gången jag
Genomläst hanne. Och
gifve guds att jag måtte
Se Lupa, att jag inom
Några år än, må få
Genom Lasa hanne.
Björkas berg 18. Decemb.
1853:
A. Jansson

Figure 3: Anders Jansson's reading testimony.

What did Anders Jansson make of the book of sermons? Below his statement on the last page of the volume, Jansson recorded the date. The

year was 1853. By then, he was a rather old man, nearly 60, and his handwriting had changed compared to when he first wrote his name in the book some 30 years earlier. In the meantime, he had met a woman, but they had not yet married. They had three extramarital children together, born between 1850 and 1852, who had all passed away before the end of 1853.³⁹ Although the topic can't be fully addressed here, there might well be a connection between the deaths of his children and Jansson's dedicated reading of the book around the time he wrote the inscription.

What other books might Jansson have engaged with? In his statement, he describes this book as “one among the very best” he had read. Perhaps, this statement should be seen in the light of someone who eagerly wants to mediate an image of himself as an experienced and devout reader. However, Jansson's estate inventory discloses that he possessed several additional books by the time of his death, for example a postil, and the Bible. Jansson's inventory also mentions a book of daily devotional readings, which belonged to the category of books intended for the *husandakt* [“family prayer”]. Written by theologians such as Martin Luther, Christian Scriver, Magnus Friedrich Roos, and Carl Olof Rosenius, this kind of literature gained popularity over the century and made its way to thousands of Swedish households. Still, for a long time, Jansson may not have had many other books to choose from, which would have left him few options but to repeatedly reread the same works.

When did the other books enter Jansson's possession? Did he buy his books at auction, or from a peddler, or were they a gift? Did he care for his other books in the same way as he did for the revered Tillotson book, and did he reread them as many times? Here, the sources fail us. Frustrating as it is, we may never be able to recover more than a fragment of the reading experience of this particular reader—though this is still a great deal more than we know about almost any other common reader in a similar position at this time.

When Anders Jansson passed away in 1876, he was 79 years old. By then he had been married twice, but both his wives had died, as had three out of four of his children. His only remaining son emigrated to Norway in 1888. The book may have been sold at auction after Jansson's death, or perhaps his son parted with it when he emigrated. It seems nonetheless likely that

the book was left behind, since the person I bought it from had picked it up at a flea market in southern Sweden.

The Reading Testimony Contextualized

The two first owners of the book of sermons belonged to society's elite: the clergy and the nobility. For centuries, these two groups formed the literate classes, which lived and thrived in a world shaped by knowledge and books. Most male members of these groups were professional readers; they were educated at universities and often inherited, or assembled, private libraries. Their sisters and daughters were taught by private tutors. In all likelihood, the collection of Tillotson's sermons was not the only book in Hedén's or von Rappholt's possession.

The vast majority of accounts of reading from the time thus come from the elite group of readers. It is their acts of reading that have been recorded in diaries, memoirs, and letters, and depicted in drawings and portraits. The reading of common people, however, has largely gone unnoticed, except for the stern remarks made by the Swedish vicars in their records from the household examinations. Owing largely to the lack of sources from the lower echelons of society, it has always been the reading of society's elites, that has shaped our views of historical reading practices. Although more accessible and far easier to study, this group's reading habits are not necessarily representative of reading in general at the time. The image of the readers and their reading practices that reaches us from bygone times is therefore naturally distorted. Although the uneven access to education and books set the stage for reading practices running along socioeconomic lines, the perspective lacks nuance. Able and keen readers can be found in all strands of society, but for every common reader whose reading habits we are able to study, a hundred remain silent.

The lack of sources notwithstanding, it should come as no surprise that it was the elite groups of readers, including the academics and the bourgeoisie, who were first in line to adapt to the new reading standards in the early nineteenth century, since they had both the time and the money to consume literature on a greater scale. These readers were the ones whose reading habits were transforming from intensive to extensive, at the same time as the great majority of the population was hardly able to access a single book.

There is ample evidence suggesting that the changes in reading practices observed by scholars such as Engelsing and David D. Hall in continental Europe and America respectively were taking place in Sweden as well, although perhaps a bit later, as we shall see from the following two examples.

The first is the author and philosopher Per Daniel Amadeus Atterbom (1790–1855), who, in his memoirs, published in the 1840s, complained that the reading habits of his peers were marked by “a soul-draining mass reading.”⁴⁰ Atterbom further remarked that he missed the reading habits of his childhood, which had been characterized by contemplation and thoughtfulness.⁴¹ The second example is the vicar Johan Fredrik Muncktell (1764–1848), whose diary provides detailed insight into his reading habits, and whose reading has been analyzed at some length by Åke Åberg.⁴² In his diary, Muncktell confessed that sometimes, he got carried away and would read books at a far greater speed than he intended. Afterwards, he would wallow in shame. “A book, that would occupy the readers of old for probably one year or more, that they could read and re-read and ruminate throughout their lifetime, I will finish in a day or less, and then I will head straight on to the next book.”⁴³ Muncktell was particularly concerned with his reading of newspapers. “My soul is filled up by strange delusions and images, of the most mindless nature, to the extent that hardly any free time and peace and quiet is left for more dignified pursuits.”⁴⁴ These accounts from Muncktell’s diary come from the 1820s, and by then the reading habits among the professional readers in Sweden had evidently already transformed from intensive to extensive.

As the examples of the academic Atterbom and the vicar Muncktell clearly suggest, the changes to reading practices that had been sweeping across Europe at this time had taken hold in Sweden, too, by the turn of the century. But what about the reading of the common people? Here, Jansson’s writing on the last page of the book of sermons may add a piece to the puzzle. Even though Jansson’s statement leaves a lot of questions unanswered concerning his reading of the book, it is an important account since it gives voice to a group of readers that is painstakingly difficult to study. Not only does it disclose that a simple crofter like Anders Jansson could find a way to maintain his reading ability after schooling, but it also indicates that the habit of intensive reading was still in effect by the

mid-nineteenth century among certain sections of society. The vicar Muncktell who, in the 1820s, seemed to lament the loss of old-fashioned reading, would perhaps be surprised to find a reader in the 1850s who lived up to his ideals.

But would Jansson have been recognized as a qualified reader by Muncktell? Muncktell would have encountered the likes of Jansson many times, in performing his duties as vicar. And yet with all probability, he would not have perceived Jansson as an equal when it came to reading. Although trained in the art of reading and writing, and perhaps even an eager learner, Jansson remained a peasant, and was therefore lost to the literary universe with which Muncktell would have been intimately familiar, having gained admittance in his youth as was typical of elite readers at the time. This situation raises an interesting issue, which unfortunately does not lie within the scope of the present study: was the democratization of literacy perceived as a positive development by the literary elites? And even more to the point, as Stephen Lovell puts it, “how did the social status of reading change as the reading public broadened?”⁴⁵

Hall has pointed out that reading habits in New England changed only around the mid-1800s, when the previous scarcity of print materials in the book market were replaced by an abundance.⁴⁶ Several scholars have also highlighted the relation between secularization and the practice of extensive reading: a “desacralization of the printed word.”⁴⁷ Roger Chartier has even described the “extensive reader” as someone who “holds less sacred what is read.”⁴⁸ Extensive reading defined in that way is a far cry from Jansson’s close and reverent reading of his book in the 1850s. Jansson’s reading material and way of reading reflects “pre-revolutionary” reading practices. His description of the book as “Beautiful and Godly” resonates with Hall’s characterization of the “intensive reader” as someone who held a particular reverence for what he read.⁴⁹

Jansson’s remarks thus serve as a reminder that the practice of “intensive reading” lingered on for another couple of generations (or more) within certain sections of society. The reading revolution, if we take the whole population of Sweden into consideration, was not a swift development. More of a process than a revolution, it somewhat resembled the general

trickle-down effect of the book market, where the reading habits of society's elites were only very slowly embraced by the working classes.

Furthermore, the mid-1800s was a time of strong growth for the revivalist churches in Sweden, which also supported the close reading of religious texts. It is clear that Jansson's reverence for the book has strong religious undertones. According to numerous contemporaneous accounts, the citizens of Norra Råda were hard-working, and diligent churchgoers, but also prone to superstition and excessive drinking and swearing. Perhaps as a consequence of this, the sobriety movement and the free churches were established in the region at a relatively early stage, though it was only in 1858 that the revivalist movement gained a real foothold.⁵⁰ We cannot tell whether Jansson was one of the early members of the free churches, but it seems more likely that his way of reading is part of an unbroken tradition of intensive, religiously oriented reading, rather than a recently awakened reading habit, inspired by the revivalist movement. By the time the revivalist movement was sweeping across Norra Råda the book had already been in Jansson's possession for four decades.

Although the ability to read had been commonplace in Sweden since the early modern period, the democratization of reading would occur only much later. The Diocese of Karlstad, which includes the entire region of Värmland, where Jansson lived, was an early supporter of parish libraries. The first libraries were established here around 1800, and by 1844 parish libraries were present in 38 of 42 of the diocese's parishes.⁵¹ Here, peasants had cheap access to books of a variety of different genres, as well as newspapers and magazines. In 1852, a parish library was established in Norra Råda, which would have been Jansson's closest library. According to the official reports, it was frequently used by the parishioners.⁵² In the later years of his life, in other words, Jansson did not live in an entirely bookless society. Perhaps some of the other books Jansson vaguely referred to having read in his inscription came from one of the nearby parish libraries.

Access to an abundance of print, or at the very least to a few books other than the required schoolbooks and devotional texts, was necessary for the reading revolution to take place. In mid-nineteenth century Värmland, although the time was nearly ripe for a reading revolution to take place, it seems that old practices still persisted. The bookless society was slowly

vanishing, but, at least for some time, the habit of intensive reading lingered on among the likes of Jansson.

An Asymmetric Reading Revolution

It is a flawed history of reading that does not consider the irregular developments of reading practices and fails to study readers from all social strata. Reading is not an evolutionary process, where one mode of reading transforms into a new one. It may be tempting to visualize the history of reading as a linear development, where specific eras saw the rise and popularity of specific books: a time for Shakespeare, for Goethe, for Ibsen and so forth. In reality, though, the fluctuating popularity of literature is complex and irregular, influenced by the dynamics of political, social, and economic changes, which do not necessarily follow the chronology of literary history. It is telling, for example, that for the Swedish audience, Shakespeare was largely a nineteenth-century phenomenon, who appeared in Swedish translation not long before Dickens.⁵³

From the individual reader's perspective, there were no boundaries between literary eras, and historically, most were not entitled to the luxury of choice when it comes to reading materials. Some readers indeed laughed at *Candide*, cried over the fate of young Werther, or ploughed through the *Waverley* novels, but the vast majority were unable to do so. To stay attuned to the literary currents of the day was something most readers simply could not afford. Instead, they had to settle for the books they could get a hold of. Often, this meant religious works from a bygone era. William St. Clair has observed similar tendencies among English readers during the romantic period: “[F]or those who ... were at the lower boundaries of the reading nation, many, on the eve of the romantic period, were still reading ... a body of printed texts which were produced in the pre-modern age.”⁵⁴ St. Clair goes further in suggesting that the “layering of readership” could have far-reaching negative effects for learning, even for curiosity, and ultimately on the democratization process as a whole, since it “created a self-reinforcing pattern in which the readerly horizons of expectations also diverged, the economically less-well-off being, on the whole, held back in various stages of obsolescence in their horizons of expectations as well as in the texts they read.”⁵⁵

It is important to keep in mind that for Swedish readers in general, there was no real incentive to engage with literature other than the recommended devotional reading and schoolbooks. Religious control characterized the reading habits of common men well into the nineteenth century. The Swedish provincial governors' report for 1856–60 stated that “[t]he desire to read religious writings is old in Sweden.”⁵⁶ This would have come as no great surprise to the authors of the report, since access to books other than those regarded as edifying remained largely restricted for the great majority of the population. Often, the mere cost of books ensured that radical literature and distractions, such as fiction, were kept at a safe distance from the working classes.

Just as Shakespeare and Dickens could appear anachronistically as contemporaries in the Swedish book market, modes of reading that we now associate with different eras could thrive at the same time and at the same place. Atterbom and Muncktell were “extensive readers” at the same time as Jansson was an “intensive reader.” Another example comes from the small village of Kroppåkra in southern Sweden. Here, the two neighbours and peasants, Anders Nilsson and Johannes Persson, were members of the same parish library during the 1870s. They were both voracious readers, but they displayed completely different literary preferences and even modes of reading, according to the records of their library loans. The somewhat older Nilsson ploughed through the library's fiction section, whereas Persson primarily read devotional literature, often the same books many times each, over the years.⁵⁷ Yet another example illustrates how different traditions of reading could co-exist under the same roof, which also links the different modes of reading to socioeconomic factors. The vicar's wife Catharina Ulrika Borelius, née Böttiger, would read aloud the works of the pious vicar Sven Bælter to her maids, at the same time as she herself read Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*.⁵⁸ This took place in the 1840s, around the same time that Jansson was slowly working his way through Tillotson's sermons.

Conclusion

The society in which Hedén bought the book of Tillotson's sermons in 1766 and the society in which Jansson's estate inventory was compiled in 1876 were different in many ways. The bookless society was transforming and slowly vanishing, even for the likes of Jansson. The old reading habits, by

contrast, lingered on within certain sections of society—at least for some time.

Although common readers were still unable to buy books on a regular basis, the advent of public libraries, alongside cheap mass-produced literary series, brought about change and constituted a major step towards a liberated reading culture. For readers who had never had access to more than a handful of carefully selected books, even the most modest parish libraries must have seemed like a veritable literary smorgasbord. Readers, regardless of social standing and gender, were increasingly able to explore an unknown literary universe, and to read and discard books in a manner that had so far only been open to affluent members of society. Over the course of Jansson's lifetime, Swedish reading culture was becoming increasingly well developed and democratic, a transformation that also provided the literary infrastructure required for reading practices themselves to undergo change.

Estate inventories show that it was not uncommon for ordinary people in Sweden to own books in the mid-nineteenth century: a postil, a hymnbook, or the Bible. Many of the owners would also carefully, and probably proudly, put their names in their books. What is uncommon in the case of the volume discussed in this essay is that we have been able to follow the transition of a book as it passes from the richer and educated segments to the poorer and uneducated, and furthermore, that we have been able to identify its owners and its whereabouts over more than a century. In his contributions to the recorded history of the book, Jansson not only disclosed how many times he had read it, and how much he appreciated reading it, but he also provided us with a location and a date. This made it possible to draw on detailed and well-preserved church records and estate inventories, which have provided us with information concerning Jansson's learning and his reading abilities at particular times, as well as of his possessions at the time of his death.

As for the book itself, in quite a few ways it can be said to epitomize central aspects of the book market and of reading practices in the Swedish countryside during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Printed in Gothenburg and presumably sold in Uppsala, before being kept in various locations in rural Värmland for over a century, the book was bought, read, read again, and sold at auction. Changing hands quite a few

times, it was presumably used and appreciated in very different ways by its very different owners. For decades at a time, the volume was kept in a vicar's house, on a nobleman's estate, and in a farmhand's humble hut. All of those owners and readers left their traces in the book, and in this way, it is actually not unlike most other volumes that have been preserved over the centuries. Jansson's statement on the last page of the book, however, makes its history stand out and come alive, and allows us to catch a rare glimpse of how this particular volume was used and revered, while also furthering our understanding of reading habits at the time. *Habent sua fata libelli.*

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Notes

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented in 2017 at the annual conference of the Society of the History of Authorship, Reading & Publishing (SHARP), held in Victoria, BC, Canada.

² Full title: *Doct. Johan Tillotsons, Lord Ärke-Biskops uti Canterbury och Kongl. Stor-Brit. Geh. Råds Utvalda predikningar, ifrån ängelska språket öfversatte af Lorents Julius Kullin* (Göteborg: Lange, 1765–70).

³ Dehta är En mycket
Waker och gudelig bok
En med de aldra bästa
jag Läst, och dett är
Nu tredje gången jag
Genomläst hånne. Och
Gifve gud att jag måtte
Få Lefva, att jag inom
Några år än, må få

Genom Läsa hänne.
Björkåsberg d. 18. Desemb.
1853:
A.. Jansson. [My translation]

⁴ Ian Jackson, “Approaches to the History of Readers and Reading in Eighteenth-Century Britain,” *The Historical Journal* 47, no. 4 (2004): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4091667>, p. 1046.

⁵ Leah Price, “Reading: The State of the Discipline,” *Book History* 7, no. 1 (2004): <https://doi.org/10.1353/bh.2004.0023>.

⁶ Rolf Engelsing, *Der Bürger als Leser: Lesergeschichte in Deutschland 1500-1800* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1974).

⁷ Erich Schön, *Der Verlust der Sinnlichkeit, oder die Verwandlungen des Lesers: Mentalitätswandel um 1800*, vol. 12, Sprache und Geschichte (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1987), 45–46.

⁸ Reinhard Wittmann, “Was There a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?,” in *A History of Reading in the West*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier (Oxford: Polity Press, 1999), 289.

⁹ Robert Darnton, “First Steps Toward a History of Reading,” *Australian Journal of French Studies* 23, no. 1 (2014): <https://doi.org/10.3828/AJFS.2014.14>.

¹⁰ Charlotte Appel and Morten Fink-Jensen, *Religious Reading in the Lutheran North: Studies in Early Modern Scandinavian Book Culture* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Pub., 2011), 9.

¹¹ David Vincent, *The Rise of Mass Literacy: Reading and Writing in Modern Europe*, Themes in History (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 9–10; Egil Johansson, “The History of Literacy in Sweden,” in *Understanding Literacy in its Historical Contexts: Socio-cultural History and the Legacy of Egil Johansson*, ed. Harvey J. Graff, Alison Mackinnon, Bengt Sandin, and Ian Winchester (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2009), 29.

¹² “[D]et finnes icke en på 1000 af Svenska Allmogen som icke kan läsa.” Carl af Forsell, *Statistik öfver Sverige, grundad på offentliga handlingar: jemte en karta öfver den nordiska halfön* (Stockholm: Johan Hörberg, 1833), 58. Quoted in Johansson, “The History of Literacy in Sweden,” 28.

¹³ “En fullwext, som ej kan läsa inan, är så sällsynt, att en sådan på sina ställen nästan betraktas som en hedning.” Carl Johan Hartman, *Husläkaren eller allmänna och enskilda föreskrifter i sundhetsläran samt sjukdomslära, eller korrt anvisning att känna och riktigt behandla de flesta i Sverige förekommande inre och yttre sjukdomar; till bruk för husfäder, pharmaceutici och alla, som oexaminerade syszelsätta sig med medicinens utöfning*, 2nd ed. (Stockholm: Zacharias Haeggström, 1830), 6.

¹⁴ Appel and Fink-Jensen, *Religious Reading in the Lutheran North*, 7–9, 191–215.

¹⁵ Egil Johansson, *Kan själva orden*, Artiklar i folkundervisningens historia (Umeå: Umeå universitet. Forskningsarkivet, 1993).

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- ¹⁶ Egil Johansson, *The History of Literacy in Sweden: In Comparison with Some Other Countries*, Umeå: Umeå universitet (Umeå, 1977), 42–43.
- ¹⁷ Vincent, *The Rise of Mass Literacy*, 138.
- ¹⁸ Bengt Sandin, *Schooling and State Formation in Early Modern Sweden* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 34, 38.
- ¹⁹ Johansson, “The History of Literacy in Sweden,” 28–29.
- ²⁰ Åke Åberg, *Västerås mellan Kellgren och Onkel Adam: studier i provinsens litterära villkor och system*, vol. 15 (Västerås: Kultur- och fritidsnämnden, 1987), 17–23.
- ²¹ Kristina Lundblad, *Om betydelsen av böckers utseende: det svenska förlagsbandets framväxt och etablering under perioden 1840-1914 med särskild hänsyn till dekorerade klotband: en studie av bokbandens formgivning, teknik och relation till frågor om modernitet och materiell kultur* (Malmö: Råmus, 2010), 48, 72.
- ²² Gunnel Furuland, *Romanen som vardagsvara: förläggare, författare och skönlitterära häftesserier i Sverige 1833-1851 från Lars Johan Hierta till Albert Bonnier* (Stockholm: LaGun, 2007), 117–18.
- ²³ Johan Hammarin, *Carlstad stifts berdaminne*, vol. 1 (Carlstad: G. Wallencrona, 1845), 289.
- ²⁴ Gabriel Anrep, *Svenska adelns ättar-taflor*, vol. 3, von Nackreij - Skytte (Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt & söner, 1858–1864), 315–16.
- ²⁵ Norra Råda kyrkoarkiv, Husförhörslängder, SE/VA/13399/A I/6 (1816–1820), 226.
- ²⁶ Stewart J. Brown and Timothy Tackett, *The Cambridge History of Christianity, Vol. 7: Enlightenment, Reawakening and Revolution 1660–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 141.
- ²⁷ Francis Coventry, *The History of Pompey the Little: Or, The Life and Adventures of a Lap-Dog*, ed. Nicholas Hudson (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2008), 82.
- ²⁸ Iréne Simon, “Anglican Rationalism in the Seventeenth Century” in *Three Restoration Divines: Barrow, South and Tillotson* (Liège: Presses universitaires de Liège, 1967), 71.
- ²⁹ Elis Malmeström, *Ur det andliga livets historia i Norra Råda-bygden under 1800-talet: åkstycken, gestalter och sammanhang* (Stockholm: Svenska kyrkans diakonistyrelsens bokförlag, 1935), 43–44, 64.
- ³⁰ Norra Råda kyrkoarkiv, Husförhörslängder, SE/VA/13399/A I/3–6 (1801–1806; 1807–1810; 1811–1815; 1816–1820).
- ³¹ Appel and Fink-Jensen, *Religious Reading in the Lutheran North*, 196.
- ³² Malmeström, *Ur det andliga livets historia i Norra Råda-bygden under 1800-talet*, 47.

³³ I am grateful to Eira Eriksson for locating Jansson's estate inventory. Älvdals nedre tingslags häradsrätt (SE/VA/11048). FII:6, 1875–1876.

³⁴ ”Om än Bondens eller Torparens stuga i alt öfrigt vitnar om det högsta armod, så finner man der likväl nästan alltid, en Psalmbok, en Bibel, en Postilla och ibland flera andaktsböcker.” Forsell, *Statistik öfver Sverige, grundad på offentliga handlingar*, 58. Quoted in Johansson, “The History of Literacy in Sweden,” 28.

³⁵ Hilding Pleijel, *Hustavlans värld: kyrkligt folkliv i äldre tiders Sverige* (Stockholm: Verbum, 1970), 137–50.

³⁶ Malmeström, *Ur det andliga livets historia i Norra Råda-bygden under 1800-talet*, 50.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁸ Holbrook Jackson, *The Anatomy of Bibliomania* (New York: AMS Press, 1979), 213.

³⁹ Norra Råda kyrkoarkiv, Husförhörslängder, SE/VA/13399/A I/13b (1851–1855), 202.

⁴⁰ ”Själ-utmärglande mångläseri.” Eric Johannesson, *Den läsande familjen: familjetidskriften i Sverige 1850-1880*, vol. 96 (Stockholm: Nordiska museet, 1980), 19.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴² Åberg, *Västerås mellan Kellgren och Onkel Adam*, 281–304.

⁴³ ”En bok, som sysselsatte dem troligen ett år, som de kunde läsa och omläsa och ruminera på i sin livstid, genomlöper jag på en dag och mindre och vill hava ständiga ombyten...” Lars Lönnroth and Sven Delblanc, *Den Svenska litteraturen: De liberala genombrotten: 1830-1890*, vol. 3 (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1988), 28.

⁴⁴ “[Själen] blir så full med föreställningar och bilder, ofta av fattiga saker, att föga ledighet och lugn återstår för värdigare föremål.” *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁵ Stephen Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution: Print Culture in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Eras*, Studies in Russia and East Europe (London: Macmillan in association with the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London, 2000), 8.

⁴⁶ David D. Hall, *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 56–57.

⁴⁷ Robert Darnton, *The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009), 203.

⁴⁸ Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth centuries* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 17.

⁴⁹ Hall, *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book*, 56, 64.

⁵⁰ Malmeström, *Ur det andliga livets historia i Norra Råda-bygden under 1800-talet*, 34, 40–69.

⁵¹ Gustafsson, G. A. "Karlstads stadsbibliotek," *Biblioteksbladet* 14 (1929): 97.

⁵² Malmeström, *Ur det andliga livets historia i Norra Råda-bygden under 1800-talet*, 52.

⁵³ In 1813, *Macbeth* was the first Shakespeare play to be published in Swedish, and Shakespeare's collected works appeared in Swedish translation by Carl August Hagberg in 1847–51. By contrast, Dickens's works were translated into Swedish rather quickly. *Sketches by Boz* (1833–36) appeared in Swedish translation in 1840, *Oliver Twist* (1837–39) in 1844, *A Christmas Carol* (1843) in 1849, *Great Expectations* (1860–61) in 1861, and so forth.

⁵⁴ William St. Clair, *The reading nation in the Romantic period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 83.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵⁶ "Hågen för läsning af andeliga skrifter är gammal inom Sverige." *Sammandrag af Kongl. Maj:ts Befallningshafvandes femårsberättelser för åren 1856-1860: såsom bilaga till femårsberättelserna / utarbetadt och utgifvet af Statistiska central-byrån* (Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt & söner, 1863), 9.

⁵⁷ Henning Hansen, "Modern Reading: Swedish Book Consumption During the Late Nineteenth Century." PhD diss. (UIT The Arctic University of Norway, 2017), <https://munin.uit.no/handle/10037/12397>, 234–42.

⁵⁸ Åberg, *Västerås mellan Kellgren och Onkel Adam*, 327.

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5b: 1811–1815

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