

**‘Store their Minds with Much Valuable Knowledge’: Agricultural Improvement
at the Selkirk Subscription Library, 1799-1814.**

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Founded by networks of likeminded friends, associates and neighbours in communities across the Anglophone world in the late eighteenth century, subscription libraries were conceived as fundamentally improving institutions, and repeatedly described as such in library minute books, constitutions, anniversary celebrations, and published mission statements.¹ I have argued previously that the hugely enthusiastic take-up of library culture in provincial Scotland had as much to do with the associational practices involved in founding, developing and managing subscription libraries as it did with the books they provided. At the Wigtown Library, a significant number of subscribers rarely borrowed books but were exceptionally active in its associational affairs; men such as the county’s leading law officer, Commissary William McConnell, who was a three-time president of the library, the clergyman John G. Maitland and the army captain John Hathorn of Castlewigg.² Such individuals invested in subscription libraries because they allowed them to indulge in some of the leading cultural priorities of the age, importing the inherently improving qualities of disinterested association and structured conversation to the local level. In a compelling case study of library culture in Georgian Leeds, Rebecca Bowd challenges the ‘prevailing notion that subscription libraries...served primarily as vehicles of enlightened politeness and sociability’, emphasising instead their functional role in sustaining ‘a culture of specialization and expertise’ in a rapidly changing industrial landscape.³ From a rigorous analysis of catalogues and minute books, Bowd demonstrates that each of the subscription libraries founded in Leeds before 1800 facilitated access to a different form of ‘useful knowledge’ and ‘technical information’. The Leeds Medical Library (founded 1768) allowed medical men to keep up with the latest professional advances in anatomy and surgical techniques; the Foreign Circulating Library (1778) helped merchant manufacturers hone the language skills that were so essential to sustaining profitable international trade; and the New Subscription Library (1793) connected budding industrialists with the latest technology disseminated in books on inventions, mechanics, mathematics and the natural sciences.

This article explores the circulation of ‘useful’ books in a quite different socio-economic context, namely the small market town of Selkirk in the Scottish Borders. By examining the frequency with which books on agricultural improvement were borrowed from Selkirk’s subscription library, I argue that the library played a central role in the dissemination of new agricultural techniques in the town’s immediate hinterland. But more importantly, I propose that books and sociability were mutually reinforcing in the pursuit of improvement, the library helping to stimulate further associational practices devoted to emulative experimentation that ultimately generated improving publications from within the Selkirk library community. Few sources allow us to trace the outcomes of reading library books; indeed, one of the perennial problems in studying library history is that library records themselves show only what books a library held or (in very rare instances) what books were taken off the shelves. They can never tell us categorically whether a book once bought or borrowed was ever read, nor how that book was then interpreted and understood. Nevertheless, library records can tell us a great deal about the environment in which reading took place in the past, and about how the practices of reading, writing and sociability combined in the improving context of a subscription library. At Wigtown, the chance survival of borrowing records for the three years immediately following the foundation of the subscription library in 1796 reveals the relative disinterest of local elites in the books themselves. But a much more substantial set of borrowing records survive for the Selkirk Library, allowing a deeper and more nuanced understanding of borrowing habits over a fifteen year period from 1799 to 1814 – a turbulent period politically that just happens to have been a particularly dynamic period in the dissemination of agricultural improvement in Scotland.⁴

Since the library was already thirty years old by the time the surviving borrowing records appear, Selkirk provides a particularly rich opportunity to reflect on the relationship between library subscribers and a mature library collection that had been shaped by their interests and tastes over a considerable period of time. Selkirk was clearly a quite different venue for Georgian library culture than rapidly industrialising Leeds, experiencing different challenges and opportunities. As the parish report for the *Statistical Account* (compiled by library subscriber and parish minister Revd. Thomas Robertson) pointed out, Selkirk had undergone relatively little industrial development by the 1790s, in spite of the success of neighbouring Hawick

and Galashiels in the woollen industry. Two library subscribers were cited as modest exceptions, the inkle manufacturer William Rodger and the tanner John Anderson.⁵ Neither Rodger nor Anderson seems to have had a particular interest in technical reading, at least as far as we can tell from the surviving borrowing registers; what is far more revealing in this overwhelmingly agrarian community, however, is the strong evidence they provide for the circulation of books on agricultural improvement. I start by tracing the circulation of farming books at Selkirk, before exploring more broadly how this literature functioned in a wider context of lettered sociability. First, though, we need to say more about how a subscription library came to be founded in Selkirk, and reflect on the evidence that survives for the circulation of its books.

Selkirk Subscription Library

The Selkirk Subscription Library was founded in 1772, apparently at the prompting of the Revd. Robert Douglas, who was later to be instrumental in setting up another subscription library in the nearby town of Galashiels in 1797.⁶ It was never a particularly affordable library to join; the original charges included a two-guinea entry fee together with an annual subscription fee of 7s.6d.; in 1801, admission was raised to five guineas on account of the increasing value of the accumulated book stock.⁷ These subscription fees are largely in line with charges at elite subscription libraries throughout the United Kingdom, and indicate that the library was very much an association of the social elites – including landowners, clergymen, lawyers, medical men, and some of the more well-to-do merchants and farmers.⁸ This meant the library was operated and used by those members of the community best placed to implement improvements in agriculture, manufacturing and infrastructure that they read about in books borrowed from the library. Nevertheless, there were apparently mechanisms in place to allow less affluent readers to use the collections; the membership voted as early as 1779 to allow non-members to borrow books for half a guinea annually, bringing the library's books (though not the shared ownership of them conferred by full membership) within reach of a wider range of readers including much of the surrounding tenant farming community.⁹

No catalogue seems to survive before the printed catalogue of 1856, although well over 600 separate titles appear in the surviving borrowing registers, featuring in at least 15,000 recorded loans.¹⁰ A broad tabulation of loan transactions by subject (Figure 1) suggests that agricultural improvement barely registered on the intellectual

horizons of library users. Books borrowed most frequently included fashionable novels by the likes of Elizabeth Hamilton, Maria Edgeworth and Ann Radcliffe, along with the polite philosophical histories of David Hume and Robert Henry, the collected works of Burns, Shakespeare and Johnson, the *Arabian Nights*, Mungo Park's *Travels into the Interior of Africa*, and an assortment of periodical works and unidentified pamphlets.¹¹

Novels – 28%
History and Biography – 16%
Voyages and Travels – 12%
Poetry and Plays – 9%
Miscellaneous – 7%
Periodicals – 4%
Divinity – 3%
Arts, Sciences, Natural History – 3%
Agriculture – 2%
Politics – 1%
Conduct Literature – 1%

Figure 1: Subjects borrowed at the Selkirk Subscription Library, 1799-1814 (14% uncategorised).¹²

For various technical reasons relating to the quality of the surviving documentation, the intuitive approach to borrowing data (focusing on relative popularity and headline statistics) is not particularly useful for Selkirk. Volume numbers are not recorded consistently, meaning that the statistics are somewhat skewed towards multi-volume texts, collected works and periodicals. Similarly, the dates of loan transactions are not recorded reliably, so it is rarely possible to engage in detailed sequencing of transactions to any degree of accuracy, or to identify clusters of loans of the same work around specific dates. We cannot even be absolutely certain about the two central fields of data that most interest us here, the borrowers and the books. Many of the Selkirk Library's most intensive borrowers were tenant farmers who moved around quite frequently as tenancies came to an end and as new opportunities came up; since borrowers with the same surname (especially the Andersons, Ballantynes and Laidlaws) are generally distinguished by their residence in the registers, the task of disentangling which reader is intended is sometimes very difficult indeed. And because the library had been loaning books to many of these individuals and their families for nearly thirty years by the time the surviving registers begin, we cannot know how much they had already borrowed before 1799. What follows is not,

therefore, an attempt at a comprehensive analysis of the Selkirk loan records; instead, this analysis focuses on one apparently marginal kind of book – the literature of agricultural improvement, involved in just 2% of loan transactions overall – to reflect on how this literature might have been received, talked about and used in the local community.

Agricultural Improvement

Agricultural improvement had long been an important touchstone for the practical concerns of the Scottish Enlightenment, and the Honourable Society for the Improvement of Agriculture in Scotland (founded in 1723) was one of the first great patriotic clubs of post-Union Scotland.¹³ Nevertheless, the 1770s and 1780s had seen something of a downturn in improving activity across the country, and one of the purposes of Sir John Sinclair's *Statistical Account of Scotland* was to stimulate further change – primarily by showcasing successful improvements that could then be imitated elsewhere in Scotland, but also by highlighting opportunities for further growth and development.¹⁴ Wherever possible, parish clergymen were enlisted to provide the most accurate information available and to advocate on the local level for the wider patriotic aims of the project. Thus in his report on Selkirk, the Revd. Robertson points out that the hill farms surrounding the town had 'not hitherto been managed to that advantage of which they are capable', whilst acknowledging that 'the management of flocks begins to be better understood'.¹⁵

As Robertson no doubt realised, the library provided one avenue through which information on the latest farming techniques could be acquired and disseminated. Agriculture features in only a tiny proportion of loan transactions overall as we have seen, but works on agricultural improvement were nevertheless of demonstrable interest to a significant proportion of Selkirk subscribers. 38 subscribers (out of around 85 in all) withdrew at least one book on agricultural improvement, while twelve subscribers each borrowed at least five of the library's books on the subject. These were generally tenant farmers, small freeholders and major landowners, but such books appealed far beyond those whose livelihoods depended on farming, including the Anti-Burgher minister George Lawson (by far the most prolific subscriber, with over 1,500 separate loan transactions to his name, including repeat borrowings of five agricultural works), the established Church of Scotland ministers John Campbell, Robert Douglas and Robert Russell, the surgeons Thomas

Anderson and Thomas Scott, and the solicitors Andrew Lang, Alexander Park and George Rodger.

Although Selkirk subscribers could clearly have borrowed them well before 1799, the expansive agricultural handbooks of Scottish Enlightenment theorists like Henry Home, Lord Kames, and Adam Dickson continued to attract borrowers throughout our period. Lord Kames's *Gentleman Farmer* (1776), with the provocative subtitle 'Being an Attempt to Improve Agriculture by subjecting it to the Test of Rational Principles', was borrowed by five farmers and the surgeon Thomas Anderson, while Dickson's works (his *Treatise of Agriculture* [1762], and the posthumous *Husbandry of the Ancients* [1788]) were taken out by five borrowers, only one of whom was a farmer. From these general guides to agricultural improvement, readers could graduate to up-to-date specialist texts addressing specific issues. Ten subscribers borrowed the Revd. Robert Rennie's *Essays on Peat-Moss...and the Economical Purposes to which it may be made subservient* (1807), including the Revd. Robert Russell, the solicitor George Rodger, the laird of Lindean James Wilson, and seven farmers, while six borrowed Sir George Steuart Mackenzie's *Treatise on the Diseases and Management of Sheep* (1809), all of whom were farmers. If these agricultural writers all hailed from Scotland, agricultural reading at Selkirk was never narrowly parochial: the English farmer Richard Parkinson's account of his work on the estates of George Washington at Mount Vernon, *The Experienced Farmer's Tour in America; exhibiting the American System of Agriculture and Breeding of Cattle* (1802), was borrowed by eight Selkirk subscribers, while Arthur Young's classic *Farmer's Letters to the People of England* (1768) – likely to have been a cornerstone of the agricultural collection well before the surviving registers appear in 1799 – continued to be consulted regularly, being taken out by seven farmers as well as the Revd. Lawson and the landowners James Ballantyne of Phahopeat, John Scott of Gala House and returning nabob Alexander Pringle of Whitebank.

Such works were read amidst a large diet of serial and periodical publications on agriculture. The various county agricultural reports (generally impossible to distinguish from each other in the borrowing registers) were borrowed by 18 different readers, eleven of whom were farmers, while *The Farmer's Magazine* was far and away the most frequently borrowed agricultural title in the collection, accounting for well over a third of all loan transactions involving works on agriculture. In all, 21

subscribers – or one out of every four library subscribers – borrowed at least one issue of *The Farmer's Magazine*, many of whom borrowed multiple issues, and borrowed it alongside other agricultural works. Amongst tenant farmers, Gideon Scott borrowed eight agricultural titles alongside *The Farmer's*, James Grieve and Thomas Milne borrowed seven, William Scott borrowed six, and James Little borrowed five. Only a handful of farmers who borrowed farming literature did not take out an issue of the magazine, and they may well have accessed it by other means – either by subscribing in their own right, or by borrowing copies from friends, neighbours or relatives. Thus the documented circulation of *The Farmer's Magazine* at the Selkirk Library most likely understates – perhaps to a significant degree – its true impact on the community's readers.

Between Reading and Collaborative Writing

The centrality of *The Farmer's Magazine* to the borrowing habits of agricultural readers at the Selkirk Library becomes still more significant when we consult the contents of the magazine itself. In the first place, it functioned very much like the non-specialist periodical reviews in providing authoritative guidance on the latest productions from the agricultural press. Thus books reviewed in *The Farmer's Magazine* were soon after ordered for the library and borrowed by its members; for instance, *The Farmer's* mixed review of William Aiton's *Treatise on the Origin, Qualities and Cultivation of Moss-Earth* (1805) conceded that despite 'his rough observations' the work 'may be of considerable use to the practical farmer'.¹⁶ It was ordered subsequently by the library, and was borrowed by farmers Adam Dalgleish (in June 1809) and Thomas Milne (in December 1812). In this way, readers of agricultural improvement at Selkirk probably treated *The Farmer's* in much the same way as they did their wider diet of periodical reading, which included the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Annual Register*. Such periodicals were a staple feature of subscription libraries across the Anglophone world, with some libraries requiring members to cite favourable reviews when suggesting books to be added to the collection.

The Farmer's Magazine also followed the well-established collaborative convention of Georgian periodicals by soliciting contributions from its readers. Following a lengthy historical preamble, the introduction to the first issue appealed

directly to ‘the attention of all intelligent farmers, whose communications will be received with thankfulness’ in helping ‘to render it useful to the community’:

The present state of British Agriculture, and the known eminence of many who practise it as a profession, are such as might justly draw upon the individuals who now address the public, the imputation of arrogance, were they to presume to improve the system by any superior knowledge or abilities of their own. They think it necessary, in the outset, to say, that it is not upon their own knowledge and experience they rely for carrying the work, but upon the communications of respectable and intelligent farmers, who have made Agriculture their particular study; and who, in place of amusing the public with *opinions*, are able to bring forward *facts*, which, under the sanction of *experience*, can be immediately adopted in practice... The promoters of the present undertaking beg leave to assure the Public, that it shall be their study to encourage and promote, as far as possible, a spirit of enquiry and experiment amongst agricultural men, and to record faithfully the result of such information as may be communicated to them.¹⁷

Selkirk’s agricultural readers were eager to comply. In March 1808 a letter was published from Alexander Park, ‘Secretary to the Selkirk Agricultural Club’, reporting that ‘we have a Farmer’s Club here, which discusses an agricultural question every month’, and presenting the club’s latest debate on the effect of irrigation in ‘correcting the quality and increasing the quantity of the produce’.¹⁸ Little more is known about this club, save that 33 members had been present at the debate outlined in Park’s report. Nevertheless, connections between this Agricultural Club and the Subscription Library are readily apparent: Alexander Park himself, a solicitor and agent for the East Lothian Banking company in Selkirk, was a prolific member of the Selkirk Subscription Library, who had borrowed *The Farmer’s Magazine* and Bell’s *Essays on Agriculture* amongst over 400 loan transactions in all, while the library boasted subscribers from the largest farms within a ten mile radius. Indeed, the Selkirk Agricultural Club may well have emerged from attendance at the Subscription Library, with a shared interest in library books bringing tenant farmers into contact with a nucleus of learned laymen well versed in the Enlightenment literature on agricultural improvement; men like Park, the surgeon Thomas Anderson, and the ministers Thomas Robertson, Robert Russell, George Lawson and Robert Douglas, the library’s founder whose own agricultural writings are discussed below.

There also seems to have been a close correlation between the circulation of literature on irrigation at the Selkirk Library and the timing of the debate reported by Park. The November 1805 issue of *The Farmer's Magazine* had featured 'Hints on the Formation of Water Meadows' by 'A Lover of Irrigation', which reported on the methods employed in England by 'the greatest irrigator in the kingdom' Charles Stephen.¹⁹ 1807 had then been a pivotal year in the management of meadows in Scotland, marked by a sequence of scientific papers on the subject published in the third volume of the *Prize Essays and Transactions of the Highland Society of Scotland* reporting on 'the best seeds to sow on such meadows and the best times for watering'.²⁰ The same volume reviewed an extensive programme of artificially irrigated meadow expansion carried out on the Duke of Buccleuch's estates in Dumfriesshire, Peeblesshire, Roxburghshire and Selkirkshire, the practical consequences of which must have been readily familiar to the Selkirk Library's farming subscribers.²¹ It is unlikely to be coincidental that all five identifiable loans of the Library's copy of the *Transactions* – to the Revd. Lawson and the tenant farmers Thomas Ballantyne, James Grieve, James Laidlaw and Gideon Scott – took place on the eve of the Agricultural Club's debate on the topic between April 1807 and January 1808. There are even some anecdotal indications in the Revd. Russell's autobiography that irrigation had become a talking point amongst library subscribers:

Irrigation was one of the hobbies of the day; and it was decided that water-meadows should be formed on many of the Yarrow farms. A letter to that effect fell into the hands of Charles Ballantyne of Tinnis, just as the bell was ringing for church. He could scarcely realise the idea of this innovation; and the letter in his pocket being more in his thoughts than the lecture from the pulpit, he was observed to take out the document a dozen times during service, and con it again and again, unwilling to believe his eyes. The scheme was persevered in.²²

Park's report on the Selkirk Agricultural Club was far from being a one off and there is ample evidence that *The Farmer's* collaborative format helped to form something like a 'communications circuit', encouraging the Selkirk farmers not just to read and to talk about what they had read, but also to enact some of the experiments they had read about, and to publish reports of their own.²³ Quarterly updates on agricultural affairs in Selkirk and the surrounding parishes were often printed in *The Farmer's* regular section on 'Extracts from Private Correspondence', covering a variety of

topics that ranged from property taxes, storm damage, harvest yields and road building to enclosure, crop rotation, mole-catching and – once again – irrigation.²⁴ None of these contributions are signed, but it is highly likely that they were penned – perhaps collaboratively – by members of the Selkirk Subscription Library and the town’s Agricultural Club. The ‘Selkirk Quarterly Report’ appearing in the May 1804 issue even paid tribute to the wide circulation of the periodical in disseminating agricultural improvement, before providing a local response to an article published in the previous issue on rates of pay for farmworkers:

The Farmer’s Magazine being so widely circulated, renders it an excellent channel for conveying agricultural information in an unbroken chain through every quarter of the island. The proposal, in last Number, of presenting correct accounts of the value of labour in every district, has therefore given general satisfaction, and a statement from this county is of course necessary. Here, ploughmen, with board, get 14l. *per annum*; and when they maintain themselves, six bolls of oat meal, grass and fodder for a cow, land which will plant three pecks of potatoes, and 9l. in money are given. Shepherds have the pasturage of forty-five sheep smeared, and ten to dispose of at Martinmas, which returns them nearly the same money as paid to the ploughmen. Wrights receive per week 8s. with, and 12s. without board. Masons nearly the same.²⁵

If Selkirk Library subscribers readily engaged with the collaborative scope of *The Farmer’s Magazine*, then, they can be associated with the publication of improving literature in other ways, most notably in their submissions to Sinclair’s monumental *Statistical Account of Scotland*. As was generally the case at libraries in Scotland for which such evidence survives, the *Statistical Account* was very widely borrowed at Selkirk with at least sixteen borrowers, many of whom we have earlier noted as prodigious readers of agricultural improvement: men like the farmers James Laidlaw of Blackhouse, Thomas Milne, Thomas Currer and Robert Arras of the Rink, as well as the surgeons Thomas Anderson and Thomas Scott, the landowner Walter Dunlop, the lawyers Andrew Henderson, Andrew Lang, John Mercer, George Rodger and Alexander Park, and the clergymen George Lawson, John Campbell and James Henderson.²⁶ Most contributors to the *Statistical Account* were, of course, parish ministers, and the blending of writers and readers within the same library must have opened up some fruitful (but now largely untraceable) opportunities for stimulating discussion and exchange as library subscribers met in front of the library shelves, convened at formal or informal gatherings of the Agricultural Club, or bumped into

one another in the course of daily business. With this local dynamic in mind, the *Statistical Account* often seems to address specific groups of readers quite explicitly. In his report on Yarrow, for instance, the Revd. Robert Russell discussed the potential rewards of introducing a new breed of sheep to hill farms on higher ground in the parish, many of which were farmed by fellow library users:

Although convinced of the great advantage resulting from rearing the Cheviot species, yet the farmers there are afraid to try the experiment, from an idea that their lambs could not sustain the spring colds and storms to which their farms are subject. That their farms are in a high elevation, and greatly exposed to the winter storms, and the spring blasts, is beyond all controversy: But, whether their fears and apprehensions upon this head are well grounded, remains yet to be proved. No experiments have been made, and consequently no certain conclusions can be drawn. Some, who have had a good deal of experience in rearing the fine woolled sheep, alledge that they are not so delicate as many represent them, and that they would thrive very well in many places where a tenacious adherence to ancient maxims and customs have as yet prevented their introduction. This being the case, it is to be hoped that those storemasters who have hitherto been prevented from rearing the Cheviot breed, by long established habits or groundless fears, will soon surmount these, and concur with spirit and vigour in forwarding the improvement of the staple commodity of the country, which tends both to promote the prosperity of the nation, and to advance the interest of individuals.²⁷

Although we can only speculate what sort of conversations might have been provoked amongst local readers in response to Russell's report, a later letter to *The Farmer's Magazine* indicates that his proposals had not fallen on deaf ears – even though the resulting experiments were not considered entirely successful:

Much attention has of late been paid to the introduction of the Cheviot breed of sheep. But we are not certain that, in every respect, this is an improvement. The returns that have been hitherto made, leaves it rather uncertain which are the most profitable. Some of our best Highland storemasters retain the forest breed, and some, after trying the Cheviot, relinquished them as unfit for our mountainous district.²⁸

No fewer than five contributors to the *Statistical Account* were regular library users in the period covered by the borrowing registers, all of whom commented on the state of agricultural improvement in their parishes to some degree, and three of whom had demonstrable enthusiasm for reading agricultural literature. Russell himself borrowed Bell's *Essays on Agriculture* and Rennie's *Essay on Peat-Moss*, George Thomson of

Melrose borrowed various county agricultural reports, while Robert Douglas borrowed *The Farmer's Magazine*, Brown's *Treatise on Agriculture* and many of the county agricultural reports. As we have seen, Douglas had been a prime mover in the foundation of the Selkirk Subscription Library and in the library founded at Galashiels some twenty-five years later, but seems to have kept his Selkirk subscription in part for the wider choice it could offer, particularly in agricultural and technical works. As well as being a pioneering force in the associational life of the county, he was evidently a particularly energetic advocate of agricultural improvement: his report to the *Statistical Account* is one of the more detailed and rigorous, while he subsequently published a *General View of the Agriculture of the Counties of Roxburgh and Selkirk with observations on the means of their improvement* (1798) for the Board of Agriculture and Internal Improvement, 'at the united request of Sir John Sinclair [editor of the *Statistical Account*], and of several gentlemen in both counties'.²⁹ At the time of writing, Douglas regretted that more of the local tenantry had not yet taken advantage of the library he had helped found, whilst extolling both its potential for stimulating wider improvements and its generous terms for non-subscribers:

Their chief defect is a degree of indifference for that kind of knowledge, which can only be acquired from books, or from more frequent and enlarged intercourse with mankind. Very few of them have hitherto become members of a public library at Selkirk, although they may be admitted on moderate terms: And very many of them discover no desire of mixing in any other society, than that of their near neighbours, or of those with whom they have business to transact. Could they be persuaded to read useful books, especially in the line of their profession, and to come more abroad into the company of those from whose conversation profitable instruction might be learned, they would store their minds with much valuable knowledge.³⁰

Whether or not Douglas actively proselytised amongst the local tenantry we do not know (as the established Church of Scotland minister at Galashiels he undoubtedly had the opportunity to do so, with a voice of authority that parishioners would have listened to), but as we have seen a good number of local tenant farmers were certainly making good use of the collection just a few years later, at least one of whom can be associated specifically with the library's copy of the *General View*, John Anderson of Wenderland.³¹ Quite apart from the opportunities the Library opened up for 'enlarged intercourse with mankind', Douglas also referred briefly to a number of short-lived

agricultural societies founded in the two counties, informal precursors to the more established club announced to the world by Alexander Park in 1808. Douglas states that the earlier clubs had held ‘pleasant meetings’ that were ‘of considerable use in diffusing information and exciting a spirit of emulation’, though they had eventually been scuppered by the frenetic activity of market day, when club members tended to convene.³²

Though published too late to appear in Selkirk’s circulation records, *Practical Observations on the Improvement and Management of Mountain Sheep and Sheep Farmers* (1815) by sometime shepherd John Little connects with this network of improvement in a quite different way. Little’s *Observations* were dedicated ‘by their most obedient, much obliged, and very humble servant’ to the ‘landed gentlemen and farmers composing the Selkirkshire Agricultural Society’, presumably yet another iteration of the farming clubbability associated with Park, Douglas and other library members.³³ The author, by his own admission, had worked for thirty years on farms in the Scottish borders and north Wales, and showed a suggestive familiarity with many farms tenanted by subscribers to the Selkirk Library, not least Crosslee, farmed by George Bryden (whose father had earlier employed the father of the ‘Ettrick Shepherd’ James Hogg), and Helmburn, farmed by the author’s own kinsman, James Little. The subject was one that had preoccupied library subscribers for some time, so it is not inconceivable given the particularly fulsome dedication that some of Selkirk’s agricultural readers had a hand in bringing the book to print; as we have seen Mackenzie’s *Treatise on Sheep* was borrowed by six farmers, while James Hogg’s *Shepherd’s Guide* (1807) was borrowed by seven Selkirk subscribers: the farmers Gideon Scott, James Grieve, Thomas Milne, Robert Laidlaw and Thomas Curren, and the landowners James Wilson of Lindean and Walter Dunlop of Whitmuir Hall.

Local Patronage and Wider Interests

Hogg is, of course, a more familiar example of local patronage at work within the Selkirk Library, with a very close correlation between those who borrowed his *Shepherd’s Guide* and those identified earlier as intensive readers of agricultural improvement. This is no surprise; Hogg must have been well known to many of the library’s subscribers, even though he had to turn to the somewhat more affordable circulating library in Peebles – and to the family library of his patron James Laidlaw of Blackhouse – for his own readerly sustenance.³⁴ Local pride in Hogg’s prodigious

reputation no doubt helps to explain the fact that fifteen subscribers borrowed his poetry collection *The Mountain Bard* (1807) ~~at one time or another~~, a facet of the relationship between reading and writing also in evidence in the extraordinary circulation of Mungo Park's *Travels in the Interior Parts of Africa* (1799) at Selkirk, quite out of proportion to his fate at any other library for which records survive. Borrowed by no less than thirty library subscribers, the tragic adventurer had been born and brought up in the area; two brothers (the agriculturally-minded solicitor Alexander, and the tenant farmer George) subscribed to the library, as did Park's father-in-law, the surgeon-cum-agricultural-improver Thomas Anderson.³⁵

Walter Scott was another very well-known local figure, not least as Sheriff-Deputy of the County of Selkirk from 1799. His poetry was withdrawn with great frequency from the library, with *The Lady of the Lake* (1810) and *Rokeby* (1813) borrowed by twelve subscribers each, the *Ballads and Lyrical Pieces* (1806) by seventeen subscribers, *Marmion* (1808) and *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805) by nineteen subscribers each, and *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-3) by no less than 33 subscribers, making it one of the most frequently borrowed titles in the entire collection. *Waverley* was published just as the surviving registers end in 1814, but was still able to attract eight borrowers in its first few months on the shelves; the library's first editions of Scott 'were so thumbed and tattered that at the sale they went for an old song'.³⁶ Scott's poetry and novels were hugely popular at libraries throughout the English-speaking world, of course, and marked something of a watershed at even the most serious-minded subscription libraries that up until this point resisted the encroaching novel.³⁷ His local connections no doubt contributed to the circulation of his works in Selkirk, but so too did their roots in local antiquities and the traditional folk ballads and oral culture of the region – an interest readily apparent in the reception afforded to numerous other books at Selkirk, such as John Pinkerton's *Scottish Tragic Ballads* (1781; borrowed by sixteen readers in our period), Thomas Evans's collection of *Old Ballads, Historical and Narrative* (1777; ten), Robert Hartley Cromek's *Remains of Nithdale and Galloway Song* (1810; borrowed once, by Robert Laidlaw of Peel in 1813), and John Fuller's *History of Berwick upon Tweed* (1799; seven). The vernacular poetry of Robert Burns, so richly infused with the traditional songs and narratives of rural Ayrshire, was amongst the most widely circulating books in the Selkirk Library with 36 separate borrowers in all, but there was also interest in other home-grown working-class poets, such as the

Kinross autodidact, Michael Bruce, whose *Poems on Several Occasions* (1770) were borrowed by six readers in Selkirk.

As these examples make clear, Selkirk subscribers were interested in reading about a good deal more than agricultural improvement. Even some of the most prolific borrowers of agricultural works were perfectly able to channel their attention towards other matters, although their wider choices might also reflect the reading tastes of other members of their household. William Scott's 405 identifiable loans included Jane Austen's debut novel *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Mary Brunton's *Self-Control* (1809), and the novels of Frances Burney, Charlotte Turner Smith and Ann Radcliffe, alongside an eclectic mix of travel writing and Enlightened historiography. James Grieve complemented his agricultural reading with a regular diet of devotional work, classics, histories, biographies, and travellers' accounts – many of which, by reporting on the means of subsistence in far-away places, had a tangential but nevertheless suggestive relationship with the literature of agricultural improvement.

At the same time, a handful of Selkirk's farming families apparently showed very little interest in the library's stock of books on agricultural improvement, at least in the period covered by the surviving registers. Amidst 78 loans overall, the tenant farmer of Crosslee, George Bryden, borrowed not a single work on farming, choosing instead to take out histories such as William Nimmo's *General History of Stirlingshire* (1777) and the works of William Robertson, a large number of voyages, and pedagogical books like John Bennett's *Letters to a Young Lady* (1795) and Hester Chapone's *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind Addressed to a Young Lady* (1773) that probably point to wider book use within his family. Although the tenant farmer of Whitehope, Thomas Ballantyne, consulted the agricultural collection on at least two occasions (Mackenzie's *Treatise on Sheep* and the *Transactions of the Highland Society*, discussed earlier), he borrowed improving works of a non-technical kind much more frequently, including John Aikin's *Letters from a Father to his Son* (1793), Fénelon's *Adventures of Telemachus* (perhaps in Tobias Smollett's popular 1776 translation), Madame de Genlis's *Theatre of Education* (available in translation from 1781), Jacques Henri Bernardin de Saint Pierre's *Studies of Nature* (first translated in 1796) and Agnes Maria Bennett's didactic novel *The Beggar Girl* (1797), all of which must have appealed particularly to a well-read subscriber with four teenage children to entertain and improve.

In fact, a quite distinct culture of improvement is discernible at Selkirk devoted to the cultivation of politeness and lettered sociability in young minds. This is evident in the continued circulation of classic books on the cultivation of good taste that had probably been a core part of the collection for many years, such as Lord Kames's *Elements of Criticism* (1762; borrowed by eight subscribers in our period), Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Belles Lettres and Logic* (1783; thirteen), Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757; nine), and George Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776; six); farmers James Laidlaw and Thomas Currer borrowed all four, as did the prolific Revd. Lawson. Books on critical taste were often borrowed alongside a wide range of more explicitly educational treatises and essays, including aforementioned works by Fénelon (borrowed by sixteen Selkirk subscribers), Aikin (thirteen) and Genlis (ten), as well as the collected works of Rousseau (fifteen), Lord Kames's *Loose Hints on Education* (1781; eleven), *Essays Moral and Literary* by the Tonbridge schoolmaster Vicesimus Knox (1778; twenty) and Saint-Pierre's hugely popular children's book *Paul and Virginia* (1788; twenty one). The prevalence of such morally improving pedagogical books, many with a pronounced Rousseauist tendency, may explain the popularity of the *Arabian Nights* at Selkirk, noted earlier: Melissa Dickson interprets the presence of *Arabian Nights* in nineteenth-century scenes of reading (whether fictional or autobiographical) as 'a gauge of the developmental or evolutionary progression from unsystematic thoughts and images the child cannot articulate in narrative to the structured, rationally ordered memories and thoughts of adulthood'. As such, she argues that its popularity in late Georgian family reading reflects the advice given by educational treatises of the period, following Rousseau, 'to maintain a child's "natural" state of innocence'.³⁸

Still more striking, given the overwhelmingly masculine composition of library borrowers, is the coterie of subscribers – and their families – who worked through the library's collection of conduct literature intended particularly for young women, including Chapone's *Letters* (borrowed by seventeen Selkirk subscribers), Bennett's *Letters* (fifteen), Hannah More's *Essays for Young Ladies* (1777; twelve), Elizabeth Hamilton's *Letters on Education* (1801) and John Gregory's notoriously patriarchal *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774; seven apiece). Thomas Anderson, the surgeon-cum-agricultural-improver whose daughter was soon to marry the ill-fated Mungo Park, borrowed both Bennett and Gregory in close succession (in

addition to the works of Fénelon, Aikin, Genlis, Kames, Knox, and Saint Pierre discussed above), while farmers Robert Laidlaw and Hendry Scott borrowed Hamilton, More and Chapone alongside Bennett – with Hendry Scott adding published correspondence between Bluestockings Elizabeth Carter and Catherine Talbot for good measure. Such evidence sheds important light on the largely hidden use of Georgian subscription libraries by women and children. Women do not tend to be immediately apparent from administrative records since property (including library subscriptions) was legally vested in male family members throughout this period, but the circulation of female conduct literature at the Selkirk Subscription Library indicates that a fair proportion of borrowings spoke very directly to their intellectual and literary development. If we can never be certain that this material was borrowed specifically on behalf of female family members, it was certainly borrowed with their entry into the world of polite and lettered sociability very firmly in mind.³⁹ In doing so, it hints at the extent to which library books – though only associated with single individuals in the documentary record – almost certainly helped to regulate family life and domestic education in Selkirk, with collaborative reading in the home mirroring the more formal sociability that accumulated around agricultural books in the Selkirk Agricultural Club.

Conclusion

The circulation of pedagogical and conduct literature at the Selkirk Subscription Library serves to remind us that multiple cultures of improvement could be in play at the same time at such institutions, especially where their book collections had matured to reflect the full range of Georgian reading choices. Selkirk could even boast patrons who seem to have had little interest in the Library's books: subscribers like James Pringle, the laird of Torwoodlee and Vice-Lieutenant of Selkirkshire, who borrowed books sixteen times from the library, or the major freeholder James Russell of Ashiesteel, with just four loans to his name. These leading figures in the social and political life of the Scottish Borders were probably much like the non-borrowing patrons of the Wigtown Library with whom we started, investing in the library not for its functional provision of books but for the wider associational improvements it could deliver. For those who did borrow books regularly, it is possible to discern several overlapping cultures of improvement, some dedicated to practical works of moral improvement and the cultivation of politeness in young minds, some to the

patronage of local writers, local history and local traditions, some to other forms of useful knowledge not discussed here. But whereas specialist subscription libraries emerged in Leeds to offer a range of technical and professional books that could inform the city's rapid industrialisation, the more general collection at the Selkirk Library was enlisted to disseminate the renewed culture of agricultural improvement that was raging in late Enlightenment Scotland. Technical books were widely borrowed that could help practical men address problems of irrigation and sheep management on their farms, while more discursive agricultural essays, treatises, reports, pamphlets and periodicals no doubt helped to convert some of the doubters to the rational agenda of agricultural improvement. What is more – under the watchful eye of learned men of Enlightenment like the Revd. Robert Douglas and the solicitor Alexander Park – this agricultural reading stimulated a wider associational culture of emulative experimentation that was quite capable of generating improving periodical contributions and stand-alone publications from within the library community. Thus the Selkirk Library served a dual purpose, providing useful books that worked in tandem with improving socialisation.

It is impossible to state categorically how typical these behaviours might have been in subscription libraries elsewhere in the Anglophone world; as we have seen in the comparison between Selkirk and Wigtown, the precise reading patterns apparent in the very few borrowing registers we have access to owe much to the state of the institution and the scope of the collection at the time for which they survive. Reflecting on the collaborative plans of my AHRC-funded international research network on *Community Libraries: Connecting Readers in the Atlantic World, c.1650-c.1850*, Simon Burrows has sketched out one potential avenue for refining our understanding of the typicality of the reading habits individual library records reveal in the shape of a large-scale, inter-operable database bringing surviving borrowing registers together with book catalogues, suggestions books, acquisition ledgers, and book trade records – but this ambition is some way off, and will require substantial collaborative scholarly energy, not to mention the funding to match.⁴⁰ In the meantime, we can note the close likeness between Selkirk's development and that of other British subscription libraries that have been studied in some detail. For example, while the Lancaster Amicable Society had originally been founded in 1785 by 'an exceptionally close-knit group of local businessmen', by the time the collection reached maturity in the 1810s and 1820s the membership had diluted considerably,

drawing in all sorts of people from different backgrounds – including 24 subscribers from Lancaster’s extensive agrarian hinterland.⁴¹ Just as technical literature loomed large in the intellectual horizons of associational library goers in Leeds, agricultural improvement was vitally important to communities like Lancaster and Selkirk that depended on the latest agricultural techniques and information to flourish economically – and to combat the continued danger of scarcity, which had struck Selkirk as recently as 1782.⁴² The Selkirk Subscription Library allowed such compelling challenges to be addressed through the sociable life of reading and writing, bringing practical farmers into ‘amicable collision’ with well-read non-specialists for the tangible improvement of the local community.

¹ James Raven, ‘Libraries for Sociability: The Advance of the Subscription Library’, Giles Mandelbrote and K. A. Manley (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland, Volume II 1640-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.239-63; Mark Towsey, *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment: Books and their Readers in Provincial Scotland, 1750-1820* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), p.56-91; David Allan, *A Nation of Readers: The Lending Library in Georgian England, c.1720-c.1830* (London: The British Library, 2008), p.106-7. For the wider agenda, see David Allan, ‘Politeness and the Politics of Culture: An Intellectual History of the Eighteenth-Century Subscription Library’, *Library & Information History*, 29:3 (2013), p.159-69.

² Mark Towsey, ‘First Steps in Associational Reading: Book Use and Sociability at the Wigtown Library, 1795-99’, *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 103:4 (2009), p.455-95. Similarly, James Raven argues that the Charleston Library Society operated ‘as a social passport and a conduit for polite society’; *London Booksellers and American Customers: Transatlantic Literary Community and the Charleston Library Society, 1748-1811* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), p.227.

³ Rebecca Bowd, ‘Useful Knowledge or Polite Learning? A Reappraisal of Approaches to Subscription Library History’, *Library & Information History*, 29:3 (2013), p.182-3.

⁴ T. M. Devine, *The Transformation of Rural Scotland: Social Change and the Agrarian Economy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), p.74.

⁵ Sir John Sinclair, *The Statistical Account of Scotland*, 21 volumes (Edinburgh, 1791), vol. II.438-39.

⁶ Keith Manley, *Books, Borrowers, and Shareholders. Scottish Circulating and Subscription Libraries before 1825: A Survey and Listing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Bibliographical Society in association with the National Library of Scotland, 2012), p.44

⁷ This information is relayed by an article in the *Southern Register*, 23 May 1901, which is folded into the surviving borrowing registers. The minute books upon which the article was based were destroyed.

⁸ Allan, *Nation of Readers*, p.93; Manley, *Books, Borrowers and Shareholders*, p.36.

⁹ *Southern Register*, 23 May 1901.

¹⁰ The following analysis derives from my analysis of the original records held at the Scottish Borders Archives, Hawick, S/PL/7/1-2, Selkirk Subscription Library Register and Daybook, 1799-1814; *Catalogue of the Selkirk Library, instituted 1777* (Selkirk, 1856).

¹¹ Towsey, *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment*, p.68-76 (Table on p.71).

¹² Vivienne Dunstan, ‘Reading Habits in Scotland, circa 1750-1820’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Dundee, 2010), p.100. Dunstan’s tabulation uses conventional eighteenth-century subject headings and derives from her analysis of 9,941 Selkirk Library loan transactions, omitting illegible loans and those involving Napoleonic prisoners of war. For a discussion of the use of the library by French Napoleonic prisoners of war held on parole in the town, see Mark Towsey, ‘Imprisoned Reading: French Prisoners of War at the Selkirk Subscription Library, 1811-14’, in Erica Charters *et al* (eds.), *Civilians and War in Europe 1618-1815* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), p.241-61.

- ¹³ R.H.Campbell, 'The Scottish Improvers and the Course of Agrarian Change in the Eighteenth Century', in L.M.Cullen and T.C.Smout (eds.), *Comparative Aspects of Scottish and Irish Economic and Social History, 1600-1900* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1977), p.204-15; Heather Holmes, 'The Circulation of Scottish Agricultural Books during the Eighteenth Century', *The British Agricultural History Review*, 54:1 (2006), p.45-78.
- ¹⁴ Devine, *Transformation*, p.74.
- ¹⁵ Sinclair, *Statistical Account*, vol. II.439-40.
- ¹⁶ *The Farmer's Magazine* [hereafter *FM*], 7.25 (Feb 1806), p.92.
- ¹⁷ *FM*, 1 (Jan 1800), p.14-16.
- ¹⁸ *FM*, 9:33 (Mar 1808), p.20.
- ¹⁹ *FM*, 6:24 (Nov 1805), p.447-48.
- ²⁰ A. Ross, 'Literature Review of the History of Grassland Management in Scotland', Scottish Natural Heritage Commissioned Report No.313 (2008), p.7; H. Mackenzie (ed.), *Prize Essays and Transactions of the Highland Society of Scotland Vol.III* (Edinburgh: C. Stewart, 1807), p.129-93 and 224-56.
- ²¹ Mackenzie (ed.), *Transactions*, p.257-333. See also *FM*, 9:34 (Jun 1808), p.148-55; *FM*, 9:36 (Dec 1808), p.471-80; and on the apparent 'failure' of the project, *FM*, 16:61 (Feb 1815), pp.42-48. For Buccleuch's activities, see Brian Bonnyman, *The Third Duke of Buccleuch and Adam Smith: Estate Management and Improvement in Enlightenment Scotland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), chapter 5.
- ²² James Russell, *Reminiscences of Yarrow* (Selkirk: G.Lewis & Son, 1894), p.71; Charles Ballantyne was a tenant farmer, and borrowed several issues of *The Farmer's Magazine* as well as Bell's *Essays on Agriculture* from the Selkirk Library, amongst 117 loans overall.
- ²³ Robert Darnton, 'What is the History of Books', *Daedalus*, 111:3 (1982), p.65-83.
- ²⁴ For example, see *FM*, 5:17 (Feb 1804), p.97-99; *FM*, 5:20 (Nov 1804), p.478; *FM*, 7:26 (May 1806), p.252; *FM*, 9:33 (Mar 1808), p.122.
- ²⁵ *FM*, 5:18 (May, 1804), p.233-34
- ²⁶ Towsey, *Reading the Scottish Enlightenment*, p.119, 151, 156-57.
- ²⁷ Sinclair, *Statistical Account*, vol. VII.502-3.
- ²⁸ *FM*, 5:17 (Feb 1804), p.99.
- ²⁹ Robert Douglas, *General View of the Agriculture in the Counties of Roxburgh and Selkirk, with Observations on the Means of their Improvement* (Edinburgh: G. Nicoll, 1798), p.1.
- ³⁰ Douglas, *General View*, p.251-2.
- ³¹ *General View* was also borrowed by non-farmers, including the Revd. George Lawson and the solicitor George Rodger.
- ³² Douglas, *General View*, p. 352.
- ³³ John Little, *Practical Observations on the Improvement and Management of Mountain Sheep and Sheep Farmers: Also, Remarks on Stock of Various Kinds* (Edinburgh: John Moir, 1815), dedication.
- ³⁴ James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, ed. by Peter Garside (1824; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), p.cvi. Laidlaw himself borrowed *The Farmer's Magazine*, the *Statistical Account* and Rennie's *Essay on Peat-Moss* amidst more than 100 loans from the Selkirk Library.
- ³⁵ 'Park, Mungo (1771–1806)', Christopher Fyfe in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, see online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman (Oxford: OUP) [accessed 13 April 2015] <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21278>>
- ³⁶ *Southern Register*, 23 May 1901.
- ³⁷ Manley, *Books, Borrowers and Shareholders*, p.79; Allan, *Nation of Readers*, p.104-5; Raven, *London Booksellers*, p.220.
- ³⁸ Melissa Dickson, 'Jane Eyre's "Arabian Tales": Reading and Remembering the Arabian Nights', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 18:2 (2013), p.206, 205.
- ³⁹ David Allan, 'Eighteenth-Century Private Subscription Libraries and Provincial Urban Culture: The Amicable Society of Lancaster, 1769–c.1820', *Library History*, 19:1 (2001), p. 71; Raven, *London Booksellers*, p. 200.
- ⁴⁰ For an archive of the network's activities, a full list of participants, and other resources, see www.communitylibraries.net [accessed 13 April 2015]; Simon Burrows, 'Locating the Minister's Looted Books: From Provenance and Library History to the Digital Reconstruction of Print Culture', *Library & Information History*, 31:1 (2015), p.1-17. See also Mark Towsey, 'Book Use and Sociability in Lost Libraries of the Eighteenth Century: Towards a Union Catalogue', in Flavia Bruni and Andrew

Pettegree (eds.), *Lost Books. Reconstructing the Print World of Pre-Industrial Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), forthcoming.

⁴¹ Allan, *Nation of Readers*, p. 77.

⁴² Sinclair, *Statistical Account*, vol. II.446-7.

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