**Introduction**

This double special issue arises from a symposium held at the State Library of New South Wales in February 2020. Sponsored by the State Library of New South Wales, the University of Liverpool’s Eighteenth-Century Worlds Research Centre, and Western Sydney University, *The Subscription Library Movement and the Cultural Origins of the State Library of New South Wales* symposium explored the origins of the subscription library movement and cultures of reading in Australia, Europe and North America, as well as the role of the Australian Subscription Library (now the State Library of NSW) in the early history of New South Wales. Presenters’ papers considered readers, rules and library collections, as well as the roles they played in community formation, cultural life, and politics. The symposium also launched *Libraries, Reading Communities and Cultural Formation in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic,* a Digital Humanities project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK. Based in the History Department at the University of Liverpool – and working in collaboration with researchers at the University of Glasgow, Western Sydney University, the American Philosophical Society, California State University, Long Beach, the University of West Georgia, Muhlenberg College, and the University of Helsinki – the project’s primary aim is to investigate the contribution of books to social, cultural and political change in the Age of Enlightenment and Revolutions.

This special issue is split into two parts. This first part explores the eighteenth-century origins of the subscription library movement, from its beginnings in the British North American colonies to its adoption in the British Isles and beyond. Dr Sophie H. Jones (University of Liverpool) considers the founding and earliest years of the New York Society Library to explore the ways in which American social libraries both shaped and were shaped by the colonial communities which they served. Using a range of digital historical bibliometric resources, Professor Simon Burrows (Western Sydney University) investigates the possibility of a common reading culture shared between Western Europe and North America, highlighting the potential of current digital humanities projects for informing future research. Finally, through the case study of Richard Champion who co-founded the Bristol Library Society in 1772, Dr Max Skjönsberg (University of Liverpool) explores the motivation of the founders of subscription libraries and the promise and potential of these libraries in transforming the lives of the middling sort in Georgian Britain.

The second part of this special issue – due to be published in *Library & Information History* later this year– turns to consider the subscription library movement and cultures of reading in the nineteenth century, and more specifically in Australia.

Sophie H. Jones and Max Skjönsberg, Liverpool April 2021