CHAPTER THREE

“VICE AND OBSCENITY DREADFULLY PROPAGATED”: CIRCULATING LIBRARIES

In mapping readers’ encounters with the Scottish Enlightenment in provincial Scotland, we have seen that it is not enough simply to take account of the collecting habits and purchasing power of the reading public. Then as now, books were regularly passed informally between friends, acquaintances and neighbours and, particularly in more isolated areas, the larger private collections often became magnets for inquisitive or specialist readers across a wide cross section of provincial society. A voluntary movement emerged in the age of Enlightenment that formalised such arrangements, with like-minded individuals in provincial communities clubbing together to fund the acquisition of books collectively which many of them could not afford separately. These associational readers drew on the potent ideologies of critical consumption, politeness and improvement in a movement that became a defining feature of provincial culture throughout the British Isles and beyond – as well as a vehicle for transmitting enlightened ideas to a much wider audience.

The provision of books, however, was not always conducted according to such associational principles. Scots also had a share in the origins and development of commercial circulating libraries – ostensibly run for profit rather than improvement. Though the traditional claim that Allan Ramsay founded the first circulating library in the British Isles in Edinburgh in the 1720s may be the stuff of legend,1 ever-speculative Scottish booksellers took to this new way of making cash – actually invented in Restoration London – with such enthusiasm that they restricted the spread of associational reading in towns like Inverness and Elgin until well into the nineteenth century.2 The extent to which the commercial lending libraries operated by Isaac Forsyth in

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2 For examples, see Alston.
Elgin, Alexander Davidson in Inverness and many others in towns across Scotland facilitated the diffusion of enlightened ideas is far more contested ground, with the invective of vociferous guardians of British morality at the time apparently contradicted by contemporary adverts and the few surviving catalogues. Moreover, the solitary surviving loans register from an up-market Edinburgh venture for 1828 does little to resolve the confusion in the absence of any earlier borrowing records. But before we can enter such strongly contested territory, we must first explore how circulating libraries on the commercial model emerged in Scotland – especially in the second half of the eighteenth century.

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Commercial book lending was a natural extension of the services offered by booksellers. As long as they remained such expensive commodities it was always likely that there would be a sizeable demand for books available for loan, the result being that commercial circulating libraries “grew like cuckoos in the nests of booksellers’ shops” across Britain. Moreover, as one enterprising Scottish speculator pointed out out,