CONCLUSION

READING HAS A HISTORY

For books are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as the soule was whose progeny they are.

Although John Milton’s only appearance in Chetham’s Library during the seventeenth century was a copy of *A History of Britain*, his tract on censorship, *Areopagitica* (1644), captures exactly how books fall into so many intellectual, material and readerly categories. The Library’s three thousand acquisitions between 1655 and 1700 raise many different but interconnected issues. They range from the selection of books for the Library to increasingly complex arguments about the book trade and the textual reception in the early modern period, on to how historians of the book should link the trade in new and second-hand books, and finally, a consideration of how historians should think about libraries more generally in the early modern period.

It is useful to return to the warning made by Robert Darnton, nearly twenty-five years ago, that the emergent discipline known as the ‘history of the book’ was put at risk by a sense of ‘interdisciplinarity run riot’. This book has to some extent sought to distance itself from identification solely with the field of book history. Books need greater integration into a number of other intellectual disciplines rather than a scholarly niche of their own because they offer more than initially meets the eye. The historical evidence they evince brings out a number of different, and increasingly complex, questions about intellectual reception, textual use, the material forms of texts and the trade in ideas in any historical periods. Working outwards from holding a printed book in our hands, they illuminate a large number of different (but interconnected) issues surrounding, *inter alia*, intellectual and material cultures, readership, censorship, prices and gender. The printed

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text, plot or story of a book is only one part of its importance, its history and its relevance today.

Such qualification of the extent to which this book can be assimilated to ‘the history of the book’ runs against the flow of current thought in the discipline, which constantly presses for greater recognition among professional organisations of book history as a scholarly exercise. Peter D. McDonald, whose frustration with debates about the discipline culminated in his claim that ‘Book history is an interdisciplinary method of inquiry, not a discipline, an intersection, not a place,’ has argued that to reify the discipline is to fall into the trap of being intellectually modish.\(^3\) The way to protect the discipline against the ebbs and flows of academic fashion, he suggests, is to integrate the study of the material forms of texts and their reception into other scholarly activities. In this respect, McDonald is right to fight to preserve the importance of the study of the material forms of books and reading for the future, but the approach employed in this study deviates from McDonald at that point. The difference is subtle, but is a consequences of the way in which McDonald’s atheoretical eclecticism has been reified into ‘thinking book-historically,’ and then appropriated as a method to undertake book history. McDonald’s approach is in many respects centripetal; a number of different intellectual, material and readership factors have an impact on books. This book has been more centrifugal in approach. Working outwards from the material text and its content, books illuminate a large number of different (but interconnected) issues surrounding intellectual cultures, material cultures, readership and their interpretative problems. The approach it has taken has proved fruitful in its examination of the issues considered throughout the book, particularly in its emphasis on the connections between the distribution, reception and readership at Chetham’s Library.

The trade in new and second-hand books was extensive, vibrant and immensely profitable in the seventeenth century, in ways that have received little or no scholarly attention. Robert Littlebury made a very good living from the trade, as his estate and property showed. Littlebury and Samuel Smith’s supply of books to Chetham’s Library throughout the seventeenth century provides a great deal of new evidence for such study, most notably on issues surrounding the ways by which books entered the second-hand trade, the profit margin on new and second-hand books, the condition of their bindings when they were acquired,

\(^3\) Peter D. McDonald, ‘Book History and Discipline Envy’, p. 73.