

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: MUDIE'S SELECT LIBRARY AND THE FICTION OF THE 1860S

Monica Correa Fryckstedt



With new novels often priced at 31s 6d and thus too expensive to be bought by the middle classes, the subscription libraries were the leading purveyors of fiction in the mid-Victorian period. Established in 1842, Mudie's Select Library dominated the scene, and by 1860 it had, as the *Saturday Review* put it, "become an institution." In ten years (1853-1862) the proprietor Charles Edward Mudie added nine hundred and sixty thousand volumes to his library, and by 1861 the annual rate of increase was one hundred and eighty thousand volumes, half of which was fiction (Griest 21). In fact, Mudie was the largest single purchaser of fiction in the world. In order to house this rapidly increasing stock, he opened a new extension to his premises in New Oxford Street on 17 December 1860. Among the London literati, this inauguration was no doubt *the* event of December 1860. The *Athenaeum* reported the event as follows:

On Monday evening last Mr. Mudie opened a new hall, erected in the rear of his library, in the angle between Museum Street and Oxford Street. It is a handsome structure, and will hold many thousand volumes. A company of authors, artists, naturalists, and publishers gathered on the occasion, including nearly all the best names in literature and the trade. ("Our Weekly Gossip" 22 December 1860)

By mid-nineteenth-century standards, Mudie's main hall in New Oxford Street housed an enormous accumulation of books. Indeed, in 1863 the *Spectator* observed that by comparison the collection "of the famous Bodleian sinks into the shade, and that of the Vatican becomes dwarfish, as far as quantity is concerned" (qtd Griest 28).

In *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel*, the only full-length study of this library to date, Guinevere Griest explains that Mudie's success was intimately connected with the "three-decker" (79). The publication of one novel in three volumes not only enabled Mudie to lend each of these three volumes to three separate families at the same time, it also drastically cut his cost of advertising per volume since he was advertising three volumes for the price of one. Highly lucrative to Mudie, the three-decker format was upheld as a model to emulate for

novelists. However, by the end of the century they protested more and more vociferously against what they saw as Mudie's Procrustean bed, a format which forced them to stretch their plots in an artificial way in order to fit the frame.

The secret behind Mudie's success lay in his subscription terms: at the highly competitive price of a guinea per year, subscribers could borrow one volume at a time, to be exchanged as frequently as desired. Mudie's business concept was ingenious, and what John Sutherland calls "the talismanic one guinea, one volume, one year" remained Mudie's motto throughout the century (24).

Whereas newly opened branches in Birmingham and Manchester facilitated the delivery of books to the provinces, a shipping department in the Bloomsbury building catered for overseas readers. Books were shipped, as Griest tells us, in "specially tin-lined boxes" to Russia, China, India, South Africa and Australia (25). The solidity of these boxes was such that some of them have even been salvaged undamaged from the sea after shipwrecks. Who could sum up Mudie's world-wide delivery system better than W.S. Gilbert in his *Bab Ballads*: "New boxes come across the sea/ From Mr. Mudie's libraree" (qtd Griest 29).

Purchasing between thirty and sixty percent of the copies of a new novel, Mudie had tremendous power over both publishers and new writers trying to push their wares onto an already congested market: Mudie's refusal to circulate a novel could easily ruin the prospects of a new novelist. When Margaret Oliphant's first novel, *Margaret Maitland*, was taken by Mudie's in 1849, she declared that "the patronage of Mudie was a sort of recognition from heaven" (Cruse 315). Even George Eliot, the highest ranking novelist of the 1860s, was anxious for Mudie's patronage, particularly in the early stages of her career, and "Mudie's runs like a leitmotiv" in her correspondence with her publisher, John Blackwood (Griest 87). Since Mudie's did not stock her *Scenes of Clerical Life*, Eliot no doubt drew a sigh of relief when they added five hundred copies of *Adam Bede* to their stock and when they took half the first print run, as many as three thousand and eight copies, of *The Mill on the Floss* in 1860 (Finkelstein 39).

Mudie never paid the full cover price for a novel: he managed to obtain huge discounts, because, with very few exceptions, he was the largest single customer. The archives of the publishing firms of Richard Bentley and Smith, Elder and Company reveal that Mudie's most frequent order for a novel was "150 as 144," meaning that he received one hundred and fifty copies, while only paying for one hundred and forty four. Eliza Lynn Linton's *Grasp Your Nettle* was purchased by Mudie on these terms: he received one hundred and fifty copies and paid for one hundred and forty four at the rate of 15s each. The cover price was actually 31s 6d. Of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, the Archives of Smith, Elder and Company show that Mudie bought as many as six hundred copies: the terms were "600 as 576 à 15/," less than half of the cover price of 31s 6d. The figures found in publishers' archives not only reveal Mudie's success in striking a bargain, they also reflect the estimated demand for individual novels and the popularity and status of individual novelists.

It must be remembered that middle and upper-middle-class readers were borrowers of fiction, not buyers. Numerous publishers' advertisements in the weeklies conclude with the standard phrase: "Now ready at all the libraries." The Ewart Act of 1850, which had enabled boroughs to set up free libraries, brought about the creation of a few free outlets for fiction in mid-Victorian Britain. However, by 1860, only twenty-eight library authorities had been established (Griest 81). Furthermore, the holdings of the free libraries were small in comparison with the stock of the Leviathan—Mudie's. While Mudie increased his stock by more than one hundred and eighty thousand volumes a year in the 1860s, the Liverpool Free Library possessed less than fifty thousand volumes in all (Griest 81). Consequently, readers of fiction were practically forced to rely on the circulating libraries. Mudie's Select Library was, of course, not the only circulating library: its most serious rivals were W.H. Smith, the Library Company Limited and Cawthorne. While the archives of publishers like Richard Bentley and Smith, Elder and Company prove that, with few exceptions, Mudie's always bought a larger number of copies than any of his competitors, the notion that Mudie's reigned supreme in the fiction market in the 1860s has recently been corrected. David Finkelstein has demonstrated that Mudie faced serious rivalry from W.H. Smith and the Library Company Limited and was, in fact, close to insolvency in the early 1860s. Nevertheless, not only did Mudie have a considerably larger stock than his competitors, his subscriptions also outnumbered theirs. When Mudie's Select Library folded in 1937, the *Times* estimated that in its heyday (the 1860s and 1870s) the library counted some fifty thousand families among its subscribers and earned as much as forty thousand pounds annually in subscription fees alone (Sutherland 24).

Although Charles Edward Mudie was in the book business to lend books, he also ran an extensive sales division, primarily to dispose of overstock. How did Mudie then market his wares? He had two channels for his circulating books: first, he inserted advertisements in the literary weeklies, both for books to be borrowed and surplus stock to be sold; second, he published, annually, a *Catalogue of the Principal Books in Circulation at Mudie's Select Library* and, at regular intervals, sales catalogues. Mudie's advertisements have, to my knowledge, been neglected by literary scholars as well as book historians. The advertisements merit examination for several reasons. It is a commonplace that Mudie refused to circulate what he perceived as immoral fiction. Less known, however, is his power to promote a specific novel by placing it near the top of his advertised list of books available for subscribers. In fact, the ranking order Mudie employed here became a means of manipulating his readers, who were likely to scan the top of these fine print columns with greater care than the bottom parts. So, in a sense, Mudie boosted certain novels, while holding back titles he considered less important or less suitable for family reading.

The lists of surplus books complement our picture of the fiction market. By checking how soon after the publication of the first edition of a three-decker selling

at 31s 6d Mudie offered it for sale and, more importantly, how much he had to reduce the initial cover price, we can gauge the success of a specific novel. Moreover, by comparing these sales lists and the advertisements, we can see if Mudie overestimated the public demand for certain novels. However, since in the 1860s his advertisements rarely reveal how many copies of a work were stocked, our only source for such figures are the publishers' archives. Unfortunately, few of these have been preserved.

To illustrate how useful Mudie's advertisements and lists of surplus books can be to modern scholars, I propose to compare the fates of *The Mill on the Floss* and Anthony Trollope's *Castle Richmond*, using the *Athenaeum* as an example. Published between 31 March and 14 April 1860, *The Mill on the Floss* appeared as the topmost novel (line 5) in Mudie's advertisement of 28 April, immediately succeeded by *Adam Bede* (565). On 5 May, Mudie's advertisement opens with *Castle Richmond* by Anthony Trollope (605), which had first appeared between 30 April and 14 May; according to the *Publishers' Circular*, *The Mill on the Floss* is listed on line three.

On 2 June both books are advertised again in the *Athenaeum* (743): *The Mill on the Floss* rates line four but *Castle Richmond* receives a very step-motherly treatment: it is placed nearly at the bottom of the second column of the four-column advertisement and this less than a month after its first appearance. It is impossible to know, of course, if its low placement reflected the lack of demand for Trollope's novel, or if Mudie felt that *Castle Richmond* was not among the novelist's best books and consequently did not deserve a higher position.

Mudie bought over three thousand copies of *The Mill on the Floss*; to my knowledge the highest number of copies that he took of any novel in the 1860s. Since the archives of Chapman and Hall, the publisher of *Castle Richmond*, are not extant, I have not been able to establish how many copies Mudie's took of this novel. However, the fact that Mudie had grossly overestimated the popularity of both Eliot's and Trollope's latest works of fiction is evidenced by his lists of surplus books published in the autumn of 1860. In an advertisement in the *Athenaeum* as early as 18 August (213), he offered a three-volume edition of *Castle Richmond* originally selling for 31s 6d for a mere 9s and on September 22 *The Mill on the Floss* was sold out at 10s 6d (373). Knowing perhaps that a new cheap edition was to appear in November, Mudie may have felt a need to dispose of his three thousand copies of *The Mill on the Floss* before the new edition was published. (The *Publishers' Circular* lists a two-volume edition published between 14 and 30 November 1860, as selling at only 12s).

The ultimate proof of Mudie's way of manoeuvring the reading public are two pages facing each other in the *Athenaeum* on 15 December 1860. Here we find "A List of the Principal New Works and New Editions in Mudie's Select Library" (814) advertising *The Mill on the Floss* at the top of the second column and *Castle Richmond*, raised from the bottom position it occupied in June, at the top of the first column. What is striking, however, is that on the opposite page

(815) there is a "List of Surplus Copies of Recent Works" where Mudie's actually offers these two novels for sale for as little as 9s and 7s respectively.

If Mudie manipulated his subscribers, there are cases where they influenced him. For instance, when Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh Up as a Flower*, a novel abounding in sensuality and sexual frankness, was published by Bentley on 2 March 1867, Mudie refused to buy it. However, Bentley's archives show that on 20 November 1867, when the second impression appeared, Mudie relented and bought one hundred and four copies. Nevertheless, *Cometh Up as a Flower* was excluded from Mudie's catalogues of 1869 and 1871. This means that the catalogues were precisely what scholars have long suspected, but had been unable to prove: they were catalogues of the *principal* books in circulation. In other words, other books than those listed in the catalogue were stocked. Consequently, rather than using the phrase "not stocked by Mudie's" we should cautiously adopt "not listed by Mudie's" unless we can establish the truth by examining the publisher's archives.

Whereas Mudie's advertisements are readily available in weeklies such as the *Athenaeum*, the *Spectator* or the *Saturday Review*, his printed catalogues are not. They are practically unavailable outside the British Library. In America, only two catalogues are extant before 1896 (the 1857 Catalogue at Duke University Library, Durham NC, and the 1860 catalogue at the Boston Public Library), and in Australia no Mudie's catalogues are available in Sydney or Melbourne. Even in the British Library only a few are extant before 1888, the year from which they are held regularly: 1848, 1857, 1858, 1861, 1865, 1869, 1871, 1876 and 1884.

For my "Guide to English Fiction of the 1860s," a bibliographical handbook which lists some 2,500 works of fiction, I have gone through seven of Mudie's catalogues in order to establish if, and for how long, the two thousand five hundred novels published in the 1860s were listed. The catalogues of 1869, 1871, 1876, 1888, 1900, 1914 and 1931 have been checked, and for each title in the bibliography I have indicated if it is listed, and where.

Mudie's catalogues give evidence of the waxing and waning popularity of individual novelists and their books. For instance, Mudie's listings of novelists who were the predominant writers of domestic fiction in the 1850s indicate that such conventional writers, glorifying a feminine ideal of meekness, submission and self-sacrifice, could actually withstand the arrival of the so-called "fast school" in the 1860s—the onslaught of novels of sensuality, crime and sensation. Thus, Dinah Mulock Craik, Julia Kavanagh, Holme Lee, Anne Manning and Elizabeth Missing Sewell all remained popular defenders of the bastion of morality, and their low-key novels, suitable for reading aloud in the family circle, were in demand up to the end of the Victorian era.

The longevity of Victorian fiction is a largely unexplored field within which Mudie's catalogues can furnish fresh evidence. The information provided in my "Guide to English Fiction of the 1860s" proves that not only "classics" such as *Great Expectations*, *The Mill on the Floss* and *Wives and Daughters* were listed

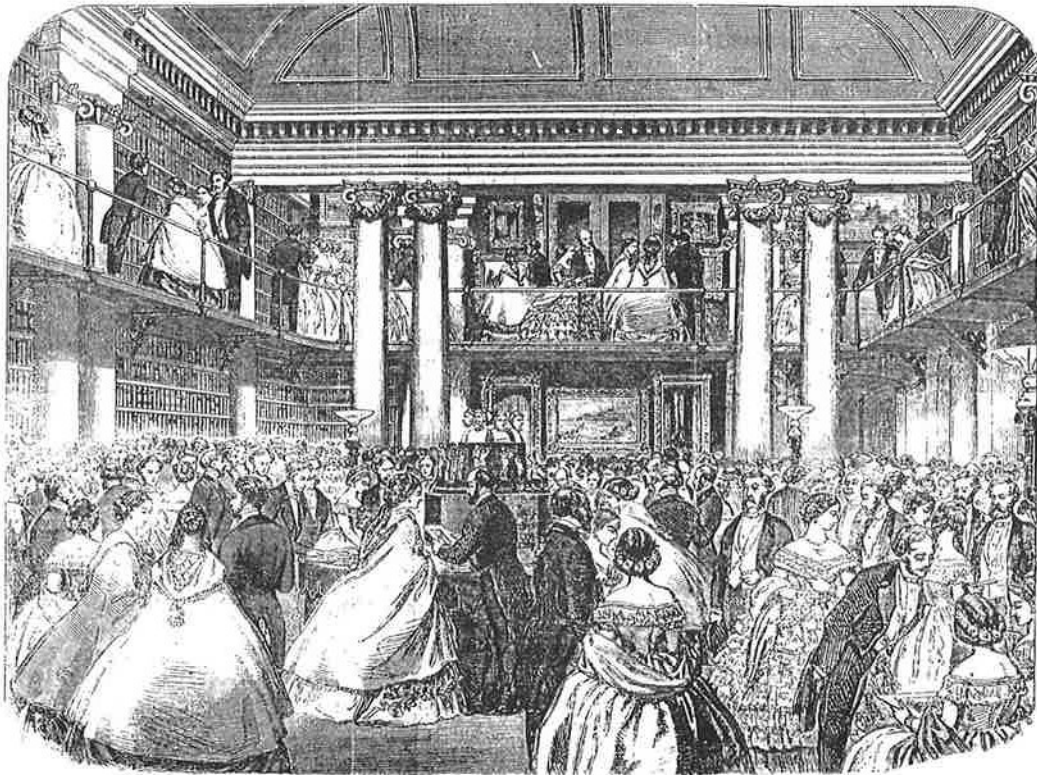
decade after decade, but also a surprisingly large portion of novels that are now nearly forgotten. In the 1871 catalogue more than half of my two thousand five hundred titles are listed; in 1888 over a third; in 1900 as many as three thousand titles; in 1914, on the brink of the first World War, two hundred and fifty-five titles; and in 1931 about one hundred and ninety. The last figures are perhaps the most astonishing. Not only had works by Trollope, Dickens, Eliot and Gaskell become classics, but novels such as Annie Edwards's *Archie Lovell*, Eliza Lynn Linton's *Lizzie Lorton of Greyrigg*, Charlotte Riddell's *George Geith of Fen Court* and Eliza Stephenson's *St. Olave's* had been stocked over six decades. This proves that the generally held notion that popular novels were ephemeral products, quickly conceived and quickly vanishing from circulation, needs to be reconsidered.

By tracing the fortunes of all the fiction of a single decade, the 1860s, in Mudie's catalogues from 1871 to 1931, one realises that numerous novels that have fallen into oblivion were classics to the Victorians and even to the Edwardians. Modern scholars and publishers have now resuscitated many novels which went out of circulation between the two world wars. In this category we find, for instance, Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh Up as a Flower*, Margaret Oliphant's *Salem Chapel* and Wilkie Collins's *Armada*, all circulated by Mudie's for seven decades. These subsequently went out of circulation but are today available once more—in paperback. I would suggest that within the next decade many novels that were classics from 1870 to 1930 will be made accessible to modern students of Victorian fiction. Charlotte Riddell's *George Geith of Fen Court*, Anne Thackeray's *The Story of Elizabeth* and Lady Georgiana Fullerton's *Too Strange to Be True*, just to mention a few, are all strong candidates for reprinting and merit the opportunity to be made available for serious examination.

It is time to modify our picture of Mudie's Select Library as the temple of the three-decker. Of course, such fiction dominated the market both qualitatively and quantitatively: today's classics first appeared in three volumes and the novels most widely reviewed and advertised in the 1860s were also first issued in this format. But Griest's claim that Mudie was "reluctant to stock a one-volume first edition" (87) is an overstatement: more than one third of the titles in my bibliography (eight hundred and sixty-four out of two thousand five hundred) are one-volume books, and of these, Mudie's listed as many as three hundred and sixty-one one-volume first editions in 1871. Thus, a considerable part of the one-volume fiction was indeed circulated by Mudie's. Much of it was no doubt juvenile and adventure stories or religious tales, but some of it was, in spite of its low-status garb, high-status fiction. We need only think of George Eliot's *Silas Marner*, Gaskell's *A Dark Night's Work* or Thomas Adolphus Trollope's *Filippo Strozzi*.

Our knowledge of Mudie's role in influencing the taste of Victorian readers is limited. We may suspect that he helped preserve the demand for certain novels simply by including them in his catalogue. At the same time, by deciding to exclude others which were available on the premises (such as Rhoda Broughton's

Cometh Up as a Flower), he hoped to discourage his subscribers from asking for them. It is also possible that the catalogues included many books which were not in demand: listing may simply have been a marketing device to which Mudie resorted, wishing to uphold the image of a well-stocked library. Many questions will probably remain unsolved, but Mudie's catalogues are useful sources of information, and once their contents are made accessible, we will be in a better position to disentangle the intricate web of the publishers' wishes, Mudie's interests and desire for profits, and the demands of the reading public, all crucial factors ruling the fiction market.



Opening of Mudie's New Hall, *Illustrated London News* 23 Dec 1860.

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