



Reading quill-in-hand

Annotated works from the old library of the Centre Culturel Irlandais

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Presentation – introduction

Beginning in the 19th century, readers learned to not write in books. With the development of the public library system and new standards among book collectors, and as it became more common to pass on school texts from one student to another, the habit gradually disappeared. However, reading “quill-in-hand” was common practice for readers at the time of the *Ancien Régime*. The hundred or so annotated works in the Old Library of the Centre Culturel Irlandais are a testament to this widespread custom. The collection spans the entire period between the 15th and 18th centuries, with a large number of books dating back to the 17th century. These works illustrate the practices of the intellectual elite as they wrestled with treatises on law, history, theology, and religious controversy. While some readers were content to add their signature or a few words to the title page, others filled the margins with personal observations called, in the strictest sense of the word, *marginalia*.

1. Marginalia

The historian's view on handwritten notes has changed significantly in the past half-century.

Since the 1970s, *marginalia* written by famous readers such as Voltaire, Jonathan Swift, Samuel T. Coleridge, Charles Darwin and Stendhal have been the subject of critical editions; these notes documented their sources of inspiration and their working methodologies. Nowadays, the focus has turned to annotations from less well-known readers. They provide a way to understand the material and intellectual processes within the book through the transmission and appropriation of texts. Used as a bookmark, a memorisation tool, a device for grasping a difficult passage, a means to rebel against dangerous ideas, or a way to answer an esteemed author, handwritten notes reveal some of the strategies the reader used while studying the book.

However, nothing is so straightforward. Beyond real dating and attribution issues surrounding written works, the wide range of individual cases seems to defy any attempt at synthesis. Is it truly feasible to base the history of reading on so few examples? Such an exercise is in fact possible, as note-taking is by no means limited to just the individual. It is above all a social practice integral to the larger culture of the written word, one defined by the rules and uses of writing. Presented through urban writing and typography, this "culture of writing" has been consistently upheld by education systems over time. Family traditions, social classes and religious beliefs shape this culture as well, and the individual gathers a sense of it in his or her own writing. By studying this dialogue between shared cultural models and the personal experience of reading, we can interpret the act of note-taking and its various forms.

The study of note-taking reveals, first and foremost, the purposes of each section of the book: the cover pages at the beginning and end of each volume, the title page, the margins surrounding the text, and line spacing do not lend themselves to the same styles of writing. As a result, readers can be grouped into various "communities" according to the way they use these spaces. Student readers fill their books with witty and practical notes, scholarly readers turn their texts into working tools, and readers with a particular viewpoint to defend cross swords with authors in the margins. These are just a few of the categories that exist, none of which are set in stone. After all, one can be a "student" reader well after his or her school-going years. *Marginalia* also provide an opportunity to study how the reader's personality develops and comes across within such a small space. Finally, annotations are also a reflection of the author's imagination, which readers subtly refer to when they take up the quill to tackle and read a text. The history of reading, the history of private life, the history of the author – these are the three areas that the exhibition will explore.

2. Mundane writings in liminal spaces

In a way, readers write their own “books” through their notes, which they fill with their memories, work and affect.

The blank spaces at the beginning of books are often full of annotations. Notes on the book's ownership, including clues to where it came from and who it belonged to, are found here as well as notes that introduce the text and record the reader's conclusions. Readers also used these areas as a place to write reminders or notes of a more frivolous nature. Even when the annotations seem unrelated to the text, interactions between two written messages are never neutral. Because handwritten notes are the first thing the reader sees upon opening the book, they in some ways shape the way future readers approach the text.

Even when they weren't being read, if indeed they were, books from the *Ancien Régime* served a variety of purposes. As paper was expensive and the binding ensured the book lasted a relatively long period of time, all kinds of information and ideas – be they family-related, spiritual, economic or scholarly – were often gathered here. Family history is often recorded in Bibles, which are handed down from one generation to the next, but we can find such writings in other types of books as well.

On a more mundane note, the cover page could also be used to record spontaneous notes such as a laundry reminder, a list of books on loan, a draft of a letter or sermon, and excerpts from other writings.

Some of these marginal notes are more closely related to the moment the text was being read; they illustrate the readers' thoughts when they began reading or when they drew their conclusions.

3. Scholarly reading

Though writing in the margins of text is an ancient tradition, it was discussed and studied at the beginning of the modern age.

Treatises on "the art of studying" advise readers to make comments on the text throughout their reading. The purpose of these notes is to allow the reader to focus his or her attention, help remember details, and make subsequent reading of the book easier. The most common markings included underlining, crosses, arrows and pointing hands, also known as manicules. The use of these "ghost notes" is a controversial reading method; although authors from ancient times approved of their usage, some practices such as thumbnail markings or cornered pages were deemed utterly unacceptable of worthy readers. It was thought that readers should limit themselves to adding a few words in the margin to follow the text. On the other hand, some wordy readers would have blank pages inserted between the printed ones to increase their note-taking space.

In addition to techniques common to all learned readers, some scholars used a very personal annotation system that reflected multiple readings of the same text. They transformed the margins of their books into a genuine workspace in which the printed text was amended and enhanced.

In the same Bible from 1538, the reader added chapter numbers above the columns to make the book easier to navigate. He or she highlighted forms of speech in the Gospel of Matthew by using a symbol system for which the "user instructions" were added at the beginning of the book. Semi-circular markings (C) refer to words spoken by the evangelist while circular markings (O) refer to indirect speech. The first words of dialogue are underlined, visually highlighting the changes in forms of speech. Numbers written in the margins refer back to the comments made about the text.

4. The reading habits of young people

Readers learned to annotate books and excerpt text early in life through school.

In his works on education (1511), Erasmus qualified annotations as a pedagogical tool. They continued to serve as such throughout the modern age. Some Latin classics were printed with wide margins and spaces between lines to let pupils add sentence structures, translations and key remarks from teachers.

It is clear from the first few pages how familiar young readers were with books. While the pages are full of haphazard musings, they also provide a space for socialising and personal affirmation. In this example of *Institutions* by Theophilus Antecessor, pupils have filled the cover pages with drawings, signatures, word games and secret codes reflecting a culture deeply immersed in classical references.

Sometimes, these writing games would also appear in the body of the book.

In the middle of the 18th century, sons and nephews of bishop and philosopher George Berkeley annotated the margins of *Gradus ad Parnassum*, a famous poetic dictionary. They added around a hundred expressions in Latin, either taken from classical authors or written by themselves to varying degrees of success. The book is not just a window into *Ancien Régime* educational methods. The young readers also turned it into a social space, letting their friends write in the margins.

5. Biased reading

While *marginalia* perpetuated pedagogical and intellectual traditions, they also allowed readers to express their feelings and record literary critiques.

Such criticism was not expressed in the same way throughout the period. It conformed to the stylistic norms of the time in which it was written, even if only to toy with them. In the mid-17th century, the development of the periodical press and the role of pamphlets in political and religious conflicts gave readers new ways of expression. Many annotations were made on books about French Jesuit and Jansenite issues, as well as on English political and religious booklets. They highlight how readers used and subverted familiar typographical forms such as titles, mottoes and indexes to critique the work.

From the 18th century onwards, annotations took on a different tone, one that was more personal and freely critical of the text. An end-of-century reader added scathing comments to *De Antiquitate Britannicae ecclesiae* by Matthew Parker. Addressing the reader of his own writing ("optime lector"), the writer links his notes to the reading of the book. The reader becomes the author's rival.

6. From one book comes another

“Annotations are what turn a book into a unique object, one that is subject to the intellectual interests and working demands of its user and that demonstrates ‘the power of the reader over the writing of another.’ ”

—Christian Jacob

Annotations incorporate it, first and foremost, in a physical and mental library that leaves its mark on the book, whether in the form of references in the margins, bibliographical references or notes from other readings written on the cover pages.

Reading also forces the text to conform to the reader’s own specific sense of time and logic. Indexes made by readers for their own personal use make it easier to understand this process. These annotations provide a map of the book based on the reader’s experience, revealing which passages were quickly skimmed over and which parts were deemed more important. They shed light on what the reader was looking for in the book – or more precisely, what was found.

Some annotated copies were specifically used to produce a new book, like the classic editions of humanist philosophers and volumes corrected by their authors in preparation of an updated edition. This copy of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* by François de Sales was used as a working tool for the new translation published in Paris in 1648 by the "English priests of the college of Tournai". The book illustrates how English Catholics exiled to France played a role in the diffusion of numerous devotional texts. In this way, François de Sales' work had a significant impact on English religious literature in the first half of the 17th century. His influence extended far beyond the confines of Catholic communities.

Conclusion

Historians have long emphasized the importance of reading and writing practises in building individual and collective identities. The first signs of self expression are found in notes regarding ownership. Taking up a quill, even clumsily, to state who the book belongs to already marks the creation of a "self".

Beyond appropriating a book, repeated "signs of self", such as signatures and dates, further affirmed the subject's identity, even if repeated signatures may also have been a writing exercise, a way of entertaining oneself or a bookmark.

Notes in margins do not immediately provide unfiltered insight into the personal life of the reader. While interacting with a text can help readers better understand themselves, any notes are written with an awareness of the unspoken audience, the future reader. This triad of the author/reader-writer/future reader is ever more present in scholarly works, in which the reader can clearly present themselves as a rival to the author, directing their arguments to the future reader whom they are trying to convince.

More so than books that are full of notes, texts that have only a rare note or two are the ones that really give food for thought. "And well done", notes the reader of Bousset's *Discourse on Universal History*, about the life of the Portuguese king Don Pedro, who banned lawyers from his kingdom. This is the only note in the book and seems to be the reader's gut reaction when the text discusses a sensitive point. It is clear that in this case, the act of reading the text combined with personal experiences had enough of an effect to make the reader take up the quill, thus demonstrating "the power of writing" on the life of readers.