



Book Review

Henning Hansen

Modern Reading: Swedish Book

Consumption during the

Late Nineteenth Century

Tromsø: UiT The Arctic

University of Norway

2017, 313 pp.

Henning Hansen's *Modern Reading* examines the consumption of the book and reading habits in Sweden during the late nineteenth century, and is part of a larger project, the Scandinavian Moment in World Literature (SCANMO). With particular emphasis on the 1880s, Hansen's study is particularly concerned with what people in different areas of the population were reading in the Modern Breakthrough period, a moment of rupture in Scandinavian literature, which moved away from romanticism towards realism and included several key social debates such as secularisation, women's rights, and wider social criticism.

According to Hansen, "In many cases, the decision to leave out the subject of the audience and readers comes down to a lack of available information," which is why his study offers a new perspective for Scandinavian book consumption. In order to capture the reading habits of the "great masses," Hansen chose sources that reveal the individual book consumption habits of an average reader. His selection includes tens of thousands of lending and sales records from three institutions that played an important role in the dissemination of the book: a parish library, a commercial lending library, and a bookshop. Given that

archival sources of the three institutions Hansen chose have never been the subject of a study, in addition to their rare ability to link specific books to identifiable individuals, his work provides a significant contribution to Scandinavian book history.

The book is divided into eight chapters with the introductory chapter presenting the research question, methodological approach, and the current state of academic literature on the Modern Breakthrough and book markets in the Scandinavian context. The second, third and fourth chapters provide background for the nineteenth-century book market with attention to demographic changes, literacy, and industrialization followed by an outline of the three institutions from which Hansen drew his primary source material. Finally, the consumption trends in each institution are developed with analysis on the popularity of different genres. Chapter five examines the findings from the book consumption analysis while chapter six focuses this analysis on Modern Breakthrough literature. The seventh chapter is interested in the limitations presented by language, seasonal reading, and economic conditions with a focus on certain kinds of readers whose reading habits were controlled or questioned, such as women or children.

Despite the rarity of the sources and the quantity of information they provide, the sources themselves pose some methodological issues that Hansen addresses, such as the large quantity of data; however, some questions still remain. For example, as all of the institutions are from the South-Western part

of Sweden, how might geographical distinctions between North and South have impacted broader reading trends? Hansen also noted that parish libraries were a crucial source of reading material for people in rural areas and that these libraries catered to their parishes' specific needs, such as agricultural books for farming areas and fishing books for coastal areas. However, it is not entirely evident that we can sufficiently draw larger conclusions about reading habits of rural people throughout Sweden from a single parish library if even two parish libraries did not contain the same books. Despite these challenges, Hansen rightly addresses the limitations his sources pose and mitigates these constraints.

Hansen thoroughly outlines his sources and solidly situates his data and analysis firmly within the socio-economic conditions that affected consumers' reading choices. His work acknowledges the importance of gender, class, marital status, and age as categories of investigation, bringing greater nuance to the study of nineteenth-century readers. It is especially appreciated that while there is a chapter dedicated to members of the population whose reading was monitored (e.g., children) Hansen frequently incorporates these readers throughout the book providing an important level of nuance which is often lacking in larger studies; for example, he notes that in Gumpert's bookshop only one in twelve magazines targeted at women were actually purchased by them, indicating that many women's husbands purchased their reading material for them (p. 147), or that women independently holding their own accounts doubled in 1880s (p. 185). The author gives a big-picture analysis of larger trends in book consumption in the specific genres outlined, but the

large scope of the work does not prevent him from providing a more "personal" element of reading by selecting certain people as case studies, such as Sophie Elkan, a historical writer and customer of Gumpert's bookshop.

The book could have benefitted from a different organisational structure, as at times the thread of the argument seems muted and fragmentary, particularly between chapters 2–4 where the author focuses on describing the reading habits at each institution and does not address the Modern Breakthrough again until the sixth chapter. Transitions between different sections could also be improved to maintain the cohesiveness of the ideas presented as well as more examples of readers' impressions of what they read to give added depth to the mainly quantitative approach.

Overall the work is logically and clearly presented with thorough grounding in a rich body of empirical data. The data collected on reading habits of different social groups serves as an excellent source for further research and the book would benefit graduate students and experienced scholars alike conducting historical research into reading and print consumption. Undoubtedly, this book is a valuable contribution to the history of the book and book consumption in the nineteenth century.

Jasmine Proteau
University of Oxford
jasmine.proteau@history.ox.ac.uk