1 Introduction

'…Mudie supplies us with all our worldly and spiritual knowledge, barring what we pick up from our morning paper. We read everything – theological works, theosophic works, translations of the ancients, like Homer and Cicero, essays on Socialism, histories of heathen religions and society novels.' 'By Jove! what a pot-pourri; and which is most to your taste?" 'That depends much upon my frame of mind and the weather, but I fear my taste is so far demoralised as to experience the greatest amount of enjoyment in a really good novel.'

Miss Blanchard of Chicago (1892), Albert Kevill-Davies

1.1 'No Library So Good': The Origins, Development, and Influence of Mudie's Select Library

In 1842, Charles Edward Mudie, the proprietor of a modest stationery shop in Holborn, London, began loaning out a small collection of his own favourite books to discerning customers. A second-generation stationer, Mudie was described by his patrons as studious, thoughtful, and 'of somewhat "advanced" theological views', and his shop attracted a small but dedicated cohort of readers who, as one of their members later recalled, 'gladly availed themselves of what was then a unique collection' (Espinasse 1893: 27). While circulating libraries of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were commonly viewed as suppliers of heavily thumbed novels of debatable literary and moral value, Mudie offered modern books and periodicals 'of a progressive kind', including works by American transcendental writers such as Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson (Griest 1970: 17). The success of this venture led Mudie to expand the library side of his business, moving to larger quarters at the corner of New Oxford and Museum Streets in 1851. In 1860, the library acquired neighbouring sites in order to provide storage for what was now a vast assemblage of books and to house its by now greatly expanded administrative apparatus: boardrooms and staff offices, a bustling Export Department, rebinding and retail facilities, and the public lending counters of the library's iconic 'Great Hall'. In 1894, *Good Words* described this

as 'a spacious and very lofty apartment lighted from a domed roof' and lined with galleries of books, and it served the needs of a 'constant stream of readers or their representatives [passing] in and out of the place' (Preston 1894: 669). Located within visual distance of another key Victorian cultural institution, the British Museum – with its own iconic Reading Room – Mudie's was now at the heart of the literary life of the British Empire.[1]

Over the course of the ninety years in which it was active, the institution now known as Mudie's Select Library became Britain's pre-eminent circulating library. The cornerstone of its success was the combination of relatively affordable subscription rates – a basic subscription could be had for just one guinea a year, which undercut rivals by a substantial margin[2] – and an expansive, if not exhaustive, collection of titles that few competitors could attempt to rival, and which was constantly promoted to the public via newspaper advertisements and circulars. By design, Mudie's did not stock *every* book that might be requested by subscribers, with specific accession policies (as well as physical space restrictions) determining which works the library accessioned, listed, and circulated. Still, a sufficient number of Victorian readers found its selection satisfactory for it to be generally considered the most subscribed-to circulating library of nineteenth-century Britain.[3] At its peak, Mudie's was estimated to have 50,000 subscribers, and the library circulated books

[1] *London Society* called attention to this juxtaposition in November 1869: 'A great value belongs to "Mudie's" as the necessary complement and supplement to our hugest reading-room in the world. For at the British Museum a man can get almost any book he can possibly desire, with the exception, which is often like the roc's egg in Aladdin's palace, he cannot obtain an entirely new book. But here Mr. Mudie, like an amicably-disposed magician, comes to the rescue' (*London Society* 1869: 448).

[2] Jacobs (2006) notes that the annual membership fee for circulating libraries in the years 1730–1842 generally stood at around double the purchase price of a normal three-volume novel; Mudie's lowest-tier subscription of a guinea represented around two thirds of the price of a novel.

[3] Writing in 1893, Espinasse supposed it to be 'the largest circulating library in the world' (27).

(both new and second-hand) through global distribution channels which were based upon pre-existing trade and transport networks of the British Empire. Smaller libraries in India, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand were stocked with books bought from Mudie's (Preston 1894: 627), and the library even offered packages of novels aimed at ship's captains, for their passengers' amusement (Mudie's Select Library 1862: 27).

As Vie Carlisle asserts in the quote from *Miss Blanchard of Chicago* cited earlier, a subscription to Mudie's could satisfy readers of a wide variety of tastes. In 1864, a columnist for the *Illustrated Times* noted that despite occasionally failing to acquire a specific title from Mudie's due to the library's capricious acquisition policies, 'I remain a subscriber because I can find no library so good, or nearly so good' (Lounger at the Clubs 1864: 7). Serving readers from branch libraries in Manchester and Birmingham as well as from its main site in central London, the library also delivered books to readers outside of metropolitan areas via its popular parcel delivery system. By the 1890s, the library was sending out around 1,000 boxes by rail or other carriers every week (Preston 1894: 675), and many nineteenth-century commentators fondly recall the arrival of the weekly or monthly 'Mudie box'.[4] Remaining faithful to its roots as a theological and philosophical library, Mudie's stocked a compelling selection of non-fiction titles in genres such as history, biography, travel, religion, and science, as well as periodicals, and was regarded as a valuable resource by scholars and researchers, in addition to those who read primarily for leisure. However, fiction, then as now, represented a key attraction for library subscribers. A significant portion – generally around 30 per cent to 40 per cent – of all titles listed in the

[4] In just one of many examples, Florence Brandreth, the narrator of *A Troubled Stream*, describes her happy-ever-after as follows: 'An unfettered country life, with occasional visits to Town, or some cheerful sea-side place; a bright and happy home; horses, carriages, and sufficient money for all my wants and wishes; my poor people and school-children to attend to; my piano, my drawing-box, and books from Mudie's; and above all, my dear, kind husband, and my darling children; what more can I desire?' (Hardcastle 1866: III, 270).

catalogues consisted of novels, while Charles Edward Mudie's own estimate was that fiction comprised around 42 per cent of the physical volumes held by the library (Mudie 1860).[5]

Although they did not represent the lion's share of the collection, and were often less prominently advertised, novels were believed to be a key driver of library subscriptions, due in part to a notorious and much-discussed quirk of the British publishing industry: the preference of libraries and publishers for issuing the first edition of a new novel in three volumes. While it was considered the most prestigious format, the 'triple-decker' was costly to produce, and from the 1820s to the 1890s it was typically offered to the public at one and a half guineas, or 31s 6d.[6] Because such a price was well outside the budget of most readers, few copies of a three-volume first edition were sold directly to the public. Instead, the initial print run of most books would be bought primarily by circulating libraries such as Mudie's, W. H. Smith's, and their competitors, who could expect discount rates from publishers in exchange for bulk orders, and who then effectively controlled access to the books until a cheaper second edition was issued.[7]

[5] Because this study has not included a full survey of Mudie's non-fiction listings, it is not possible to state precisely how much of the library's collection was fiction and how much was non-fiction. However, our estimates based on the number of catalogue pages devoted to each category indicate that fiction titles made up around 31 per cent of Mudie's stock in 1848, rising to 42 per cent in 1885. In a letter to *The Athenaeum*, 6 October 1860, C. E. Mudie (1860) reported that 165,445 of the 391,083 volumes purchased since 1858 were fiction. Works of history and biography made up 22.3 per cent, travel and adventure 12.9 per cent, and miscellaneous works ('including science, religion and the latest Reviews') represented 22.5 per cent of recent acquisitions.

[6] Production costs played a role in this high price, but it was also a matter of convention which was maintained for almost seventy years despite significant changes in book production. The first book to command such a price was Walter Scott's *Kenilworth* in 1821, and three-volume novels were still being listed at a guinea and a half into the 1890s; *Miss Blanchard of Chicago* (1892) is one such example.

[7] Data compiled by David Finkelstein from the archives of publishers Blackwood & Sons, Smith, Elder & Co., John Murray, and Bentley, representing purchases in

As a consequence, the maintenance of the triple-decker has been widely regarded as a form of price fixing between the libraries and the publishers; as Roberts (2006) comments, 'the 31s 6d price was never the basis of exchange – indeed, the high price functioned solely as a deterrent to individual buyers' (3). Non-fiction was not tied to such specific price conventions, yet it could be equally inaccessible to the average buyer due to cost. For example, the third and fourth volumes of Macaulay's *History of England* retailed at 36 shillings for the pair upon their joint publication in 1855; Mudie's placed an order for 2,500 copies of this work.[8] As Gladstone commented in an 1852 debate on the topic of repealing the duty on paper, '[t]he purchase of new publications is scarcely ever attempted by anybody. You go into the houses of your friends, and unless they buy books of which they are in professional want, or happen to be persons of extraordinary wealth, you don't find copies of new publications on their tables purchased by themselves, but you find something from the circulating library' (Gladstone 1852: n.p.).[9] Similarly, a columnist known as the Lounger at

the years around 1860, indicates that Mudie's frequently 'subscribed' (placed orders for) a healthy percentage of the available copies of novels published by these firms. Sales to Mudie's accounted for at least 20 per cent of a novel's print run in three-quarters of cases. Occasionally, as in the case of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Transformation* and Robert Dwarris Gibney's *My Escape from the Mutinies of Oudh*, the library might take half or more of the available copies (Finkelstein 1993: 41, 45).

[8] Griest (1970) describes popular prejudice against single-volume books, arguing that they tended to be seen as 'cheap reprints' or 'railway novels', and that such beliefs 'reinforced the distinction of the original', adding to the prestige of multivolume works (48). The enormous success of cheap reprints and railway novels suggests that this prejudice may not have had the determining effect that Griest describes. It may, however, have influenced the desire of publishers to produce both fiction and non-fiction in multivolume or 'dignity' editions, at least in their initial print runs.

[9] Gladstone's Paper Duty Repeal Bill, which was defeated by the House of Lords in 1860, was finally forced through the following year, resulting in reduced prices for newspapers and other publications and resulting in a 'greatly expanded mass audience' (Altick 1957: 356–7).

the Clubs grumbled in the *Illustrated Times* that 'on two occasions I have had to *buy* the book' – but only when the selection at Mudie's failed him (Lounger at the Clubs 1864: 7).

As a consequence of these factors, Mudie's and its direct competitors were believed to play a key gatekeeping role in Victorian publishing, both by those working in the industry at the time and by later scholars and commentators, and a natural corollary of that belief was that the library's powers of 'selection' had widespread implications for literature more generally. A view which was widely held – and, indeed, emphasised by Charles Edward Mudie and his staff as a selling point – was that the library would only supply works which conformed to the library's standards of respectability, and that books which dealt with potentially fraught topics, such as issues of sexual morality or religious controversy, risked exclusion. Length and format, too, were widely believed to be generally dictated by the libraries. Until recently, conventional wisdom held that the major circulating libraries colluded with British publishers to publish and circulate as many novels as possible in the expensive 'triple-decker' format, in order to maintain a monopoly over new fiction that was beneficial to the interests of both parties.[10] With this system in place, avid readers could not avoid the necessity of a subscription to a major library, nor could writers or publishers circumvent the libraries and their preferences. Gladstone and the Lounger at the Clubs were not the only critics of this state of affairs. Writers such as George Moore, Charles Reade, and James McGrigor Allan publicly complained that Mudie's suppressed free trade, free speech, and literary innovation, and debates regarding the library's gatekeeping broke out on a number of occasions in the popular press.[11] Some modern critics have argued that the preferences

[10] See Griest (1970), for example – 'the library actually preferred nominally high prices as a kind of insurance that readers would be compelled to borrow' (11).

[11] See Moore's (1976) *Literature at Nurse* and Charles Reade's (1883) *Readiana*. James McGrigor Allan printed an open letter to Mudie which is preserved in his Royal Literary Fund application and is also cited in some contemporary newspapers (McGrigor Allan 1864). For a detailed survey of newspaper debates on Mudie's, see Katz (2017).

of the library had a homogenising effect upon Victorian fiction, tending to encourage inflated word counts, conventional moralising, and general blandness, and perhaps serving to entirely suppress worthy works of fiction.[12] Yet others argued that there were benefits, too, claiming that those on the creative end were guaranteed some kind of market for their publications by the libraries, while readers were assured of a steady supply of new books. As *London Society* reported in an 1869 piece titled 'Going to Mudie's', 'The literary appetite has, in part, been created by the literary supply, which lends it both satisfaction and incitement' (*London Society* 1869: 448). Even the library's reputed censorship was, at times, defended. Some contemporary writers preferred the three-volume format and agreed that there was a need for literary fiction to adhere to some form of moral standard;[13] more recently, bibliographical scholar Sara Keith has argued that the library system, with its sophisticated apparatuses for marketing and disseminating fiction, was at least partly responsible for the success of many of the works of classic literature that are considered part of the Victorian canon (Keith 1973).

In recent years, some key aspects of this understanding of Mudie's, and of the centrality of its place in literary history, have been reconsidered by modern scholarship. As Section 1.2 describes, studies have indicated that the triple-decker novel was neither as ubiquitous nor as unerringly profitable a format as has generally been assumed. Mudie's much-discussed reputation for 'selection' has also been challenged by research which indicates that commercial considerations – including the

[12] Coustillas argues that the system encouraged 'the average novelist of no particular merit' to write longer works that would command a higher price from publishers, but that 'as three-volume fiction found a notable portion of its readers among the idle females of the middle-classes whose view of life was narrow, the artist's freedom in the choice and treatment of his subject thus was severely restricted' (Moore 1976: 11, 13).

[13] Griest (1970) describes a range of views on the subject of morality and censorship (137–40); she also notes a passionate defence of the three-volume format by M. E. Braddon, who had published forty-seven such works over the course of thirty-three years (206).

library's own current financial status – was often more influential upon its decision to take or exclude a book than aesthetic or moral standards. Such reassessments, many of which are based on the analysis of bibliographic and archival source materials, represent a significant expansion in our understanding of the library. This Element describes a project which has compiled a contemporary source of information on the library – eight of its catalogues, spanning a sixty-year period – in order to contribute to this conversation. This work has been conducted in the spirit of what literary historian Katherine Bode has described as 'data-rich literary history', in which historical data is used to assist in investigating 'the cultural and material contexts in which literature was produced', seeking to 'challenge and move beyond the literary canons that organize perceptions of past literature in the present' (Bode 2018: 3). In keeping with Bode's assertion that the articulation of the complex relationships between 'documentary record, digitization, data curation, and historical analysis' is imperative, this work attempts to 'read' the catalogues not in isolation but in conversation with other sources of archival information and data, and as complex, often ambiguous documents which served a variety of purposes other than simply providing information to a reading public.

In 2009, Simon Eliot suggested that with 'world enough and time', the catalogues might be able to answer question such as 'what range of texts was readily available to the middle-class borrower, and how extensive was the title collection for one specific author compared to another?' (Eliot 2009: 33). In digitising and collating the complete fiction listings of eight catalogues published between 1848 and 1907, it has indeed been possible to enumerate the specific range of texts which were available to the library's subscribers – or, at least, which were openly advertised via the catalogues – and to compare the shelf space which was afforded to different authors. These listings, which are now available both as a dataset and as a searchable reference resource titled Mudie's Library Online, also prompt questions about the role of the library in its heyday, as well as its impact upon the careers and lives of individuals working within the publishing and circulating library systems.

1.2 Scholarship

As Guinevere Griest asserts throughout her landmark history of Mudie's Select Library *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel*, it is impossible to fully understand the development of the nineteenth-century British novel without a thorough understanding of the systems within which it originated and was circulated to the reading public. More than fifty years on, Griest's monograph remains the foundational work of scholarship on Mudie's; it is also the most thorough, drawing on a wealth of contemporary sources in order to delineate the social and economic contexts within which Mudie's functioned. Her work argues that the major circulating libraries represented an insurmountable, determining force within the British publishing industry: partly due to their ability to 'embody a part of the Victorian temperament' and partly because of their purchasing power, 'all efforts to overthrow their supremacy or to change the form and price of the novel were ineffectual' (Griest 1970: 4). While Griest is primarily focused upon the role and experience of novels within the library, she argues that every facet of nineteenth-century British literature was impacted by the preferences and workflows of Mudie's and the other major circulating libraries, from the word counts that novelists were required to adhere to (at least 900 pages for most triple-deckers, although publishers could pad these by adding extra-wide margins) to the distribution networks that took British books to and beyond the borders of the British Empire.

Key to Griest's history is a detailed account of the three-volume novel, and the ways in which its fortunes intersected with those of the major circulating libraries. Her primary argument, which has influenced much subsequent scholarship, is that the major circulating libraries strongly preferred novels to be published in three volumes, with the understanding that this lent them an economic advantage by allowing a single book to be borrowed by three readers at the same time. Griest's work also gives extensive consideration to the concept of 'selection', or the library's assertion of its right to purchase and circulate only those works which were considered by its management to adhere to prevailing aesthetic and moral standards. Sometimes described as the 'young woman' standard (suggesting that all novels must be suitable for what was deemed by Victorians to be the most vulnerable, impressionable reader), these strictures were poorly defined and

subject to change over time, and were decried by many working writers (such as Francis Power Cobbe) who found their works 'tabooed' by Mudie's or who were required to pad their novels with extra material to make up an additional volume (as occurred with Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*).[14] Despite such criticism, Griest argues, the libraries were often beneficial to writers and publishers in that they provided a 'guaranteed market' for novels: since the British public was so acclimatised to borrowing rather than buying their novels, 'authors who accepted the standards were virtually guaranteed at least a minimum audience', while those who attempted to circumvent the library system were 'severely handicapped' (Griest 1970: 147).

Subsequent scholarship, at times less nuanced than Griest's, has generally endorsed her depiction of the library's gatekeeping as being based upon a 'young woman' standard and maintained via access to a 'guaranteed market'. In his introduction to a modern edition of a critique of Mudie's, George Moore's *Literature at Nurse*, Pierre Coustillas argues that the library's 'selection' policies were directly detrimental to the progress of literature, stating that 'as three-volume fiction found a notable portion of its readers among the idle females of the middle-classes whose view of life was narrow, the artist's freedom in the choice and treatment of his subject thus was severely restricted' (Moore 1976: 13). Conversely, in 1973 Sara Keith (1973) argued that 'if Mudie's can serve as an index of popularity, one might generalize from its history that selectivity is a good thing as long as the selection is intelligently made' (372). Keith's and Coustillas's accounts of 'selection', while almost diametrically opposed, both partake of the understanding that Mudie's' preferences were highly influential upon the fiction of the later nineteenth century, and this can also be found in other accounts of publishing phenomena.[15]

[14] In 1894 Cobbe recalled young women readers of the 1860s being dissuaded from borrowing her works by Mudie's staff members, apparently due to their impropriety. Gaskell was asked to expand her debut novel to allow it to be published in two volumes; while the request was made by Chapman and Hall, Griest views it as part of a the general pressure placed on novelists to publish in a multivolume format for the sake of the libraries (Griest 1970: 215, 99).

[15] See, for example, Fryckstedt (1995: 24); Shattock (2012: 7); Sutherland (1976: 25–30).