

Climbing the Barriers of Thought: The New Town Reading Circle 1892–1896

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On 7 May 1892 a small group of middle-class men formed a reading circle in New Town, an old and prestigious suburb immediately to the north of Hobart. Ostensibly formed as part of the Australasian Home Reading Union (AHRU), the circle found that affiliation too constricting and broke away in November 1894 to run its meetings in a way more attuned to the temperament and interests of its members. A minute book of meetings to 24 March 1896 and some papers presented at the meetings, not all containing the author's name or an identifying date, have survived to give a sense of how this intellectual coterie approached the leading books and subjects of the day. What occurred at these lively, intelligent and thoughtful meetings forms the substance of this article, which broadens our knowledge about reading circles in Australia and what the educated elite thought were books and subjects worthy of discussion and debate. As the dominating member of the circle, F. J. Young, noted, books offered "those ideas of morality and the beautiful by which, often unknown to themselves, men are guided."¹ Of the many books and subjects discussed by the group, one notable absence is work by Australian writers and very little was said about women.²

Webby rightly points out that the circle was made up of Hobart's "social and cultural elites," but this paper, as its title suggests, argues that the members are more pertinently described as intellectuals, a term first used in the late nineteenth century.³ Scholars are moving away from seeing the intellectual as "a *type of person* or *social category*" and have found it more fruitful to think of the intellectual in terms of a "*kind of activity*" and even a way of life.⁴ In a book first published in 1873 called *The Intellectual Life*, the British art critic Philip Gilbert Hamerton wrote that "the art or skill of living intellectually" consisted of "compelling every circumstance and condition of our lives to yield us some tribute of intellectual benefit and force."⁵ The essence of intellectual living, Hamerton continued,

¹ Francis Young, "Pathology of Complexity," 14 August 1894, NS 256/1/2; Diary of James Backhouse Walker, 2 October 1893, University of Tasmania Archives (hereafter UTA) W9/C3/25.

² Elizabeth Webby, "Not Reading the Nation: Australian Readers of the 1890s," *Australian Literary Studies* 22 (2006): 311; for an unflattering reference to women's superficiality see Francis Young, "The Higher Laglallypop: A Gentle Attempt at Iconoclasm," 6–7, 1 October 1895, Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office (hereafter TAHO) NS 256/1/2.

³ Webby, "Not Reading the Nation," 315.

⁴ Frank Bongiorno, "Introduction," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 53 (2007): 338 (emphasis in original).

⁵ Philip Gilbert Hamerton, *The Intellectual Life* (London: Macmillan, 1873), ix–x.

resided in “a constant preference for higher thoughts over lower thoughts” and in seeking “earnestly for the highest and purest truth.”

This belief seemed to underpin the formation of the New Town Reading Circle, whose members read Hamerton’s book in 1895. The relentlessly intellectual nature of the discussions of the reading circle marked it out as different from other reading circles formed under the AHRU banner. Another difference was the presentation of papers on particular social, political or economic topics of the moment, which made the circle resemble a university seminar series more than a book discussion group. The New Town Reading Circle was not simply an opportunity for a nice “social gathering,” “a hobby of the leisured,” as one English critic put it.⁶ The circle “treated the reading programme” and the discussion of social, economic and political issues, based on the writings of the leading thinkers of the day, “seriously” and had “an evident commitment to higher self-education.”⁷ Members of the New Town Reading Circle often analysed the nature of their proceedings and experimented with different formats to deepen their understanding of the ideas of the thinkers and writers they discussed.

An element of elitism sometimes surfaced in the circle’s discussions. For example in June 1892, members discussed the notable contribution of “a leisured Aristocracy,” a class of “easy means and abundant leisure,” to “Art, Science, Culture and the Refinements of Life.”⁸ From such a class had emerged England’s “best military and moral leaders.” If some members of the circle regarded themselves as an aristocracy, it was an “intellectual aristocracy” and this term applied in so far as their interest in ideas was not widely shared in Tasmania at the time and they formed “a distinct social group” of learned men, a clear departure from the run-of-the-mill AHRU groups.⁹ The extent to which there was a growing interest in intellectual matters and the life of the mind in late nineteenth-century Hobart was largely due to the members of the reading circle, as the next section shows.

The Intellectual Context in Hobart

While books could be ordered from suppliers on mainland Australia or even direct from England, Hobart had long been well supplied with good quality bookshops.¹⁰ In the late nineteenth century, the best known bookshop was J. Walch and Sons,

⁶ Robert Snape, “The National Home Reading Union,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 7 (2002): 94–96.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁸ AHRU Minutes, 14 June 1892, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 7–8.

⁹ The term ‘intellectual aristocracy’ was used to describe a network of families in England by Noel Annan, “The Intellectual Aristocracy,” in *Studies in Social History: A Tribute to G. M. Trevelyan*, ed. J. H. Plumb (London: Longmans, Green, 1955), 243–87; a different view of the term as ‘a social group’ or intellectual elite is discussed in William Whyte, “The Intellectual Aristocracy Revisited,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 10 (2005): 38.

¹⁰ Wallace Kirsop, “Books and Readers in Colonial Tasmania,” in *The Flow of Culture: Tasmanian Studies*, ed. Michael Roe (Canberra: Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1987), 102–21.

which “managed the most significant book service in the Australia of their time.”¹¹ Walch and Sons also published a monthly journal of the titles it marketed, *Walch’s Literary Intelligencer*, from 1859 to 1916.¹² This important source of book trade information for colonial Australia contributed to the development of a local literary culture in Hobart. Members of the reading circle were inveterate book buyers and readers and made good use of Walch’s bookshop. The city also had a public library, which was undergoing a period of transformation under the guidance of some of the members of the reading circle in the 1890s.¹³

The intellectual life of the colony received a boost from the formation of the University of Tasmania in 1890, but that boost should not be exaggerated.¹⁴ The University was poorly funded and had limited staff and students. That it survived the 1890s was largely due to the efforts of some of the members of the New Town Reading Circle, who believed in the virtues of a university education. In the 1870s and 1880s, before the formation of the University, the Minerva Club, founded by Andrew Inglis Clark, enabled a number of young men to discuss and debate “a wide range of intellectual subjects, including the theories and ideas that were agitating people at the time.”¹⁵ Club meetings were held at Clark’s home and continued after Clark entered politics in 1878. The club folded around 1892, perhaps because of the economic depression and because some members threw their energies into keeping the floundering University of Tasmania afloat. The Minerva Club resembled the New Town Reading Circle in the breadth of the subjects it discussed.

A more immediate impetus to the formation of the reading circle in New Town was the foundation of the AHRU. In England the Nonconformist divine and philanthropist John Brown Paton had formed the National Home Reading Union in 1889.¹⁶ The union published courses of reading appropriate to various abilities and ages, advocated forming reading and discussion groups for people taking the courses, and provided tutorial help to interested readers. The union’s “vision was of ‘a public university of books’ and the sharing of culture with the many instead of

¹¹ Peter Bolger, *Hobart Town* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1973), 186.

¹² Kirsop, “Books and Readers,” 116; Bolger, *Hobart Town*, 186.

¹³ Stefan Petrow and Alison Alexander, *Growing with Strength: A History of the Hobart City Council 1846–2000* (Hobart: Hobart City Council, 2008), 209–11; generally see Heather Gaunt, “Identity and Nation in the Australian Public Library: The Development of Local and National Collections 1850s–1940s Using the Tasmanian Public Library as Case Study,” PhD diss., University of Tasmania, 2010.

¹⁴ Richard Davis, *Open to Talent: The Centenary History of the University of Tasmania 1890–1990* (Hobart: University of Tasmania, 1990), ch. 2.

¹⁵ F. M. Neasey and L. J. Neasey, *Andrew Inglis Clark* (Hobart: University of Tasmania Law Press, 2001), 24–25, 30, 59.

¹⁶ Thomas Kelly, *A History of Adult Education in Great Britain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1970), 238; Felicity Stimpson, “Reading in Circles: The National Home Reading Union 1889–1900,” *Publishing History* 52 (2002): 19–82.

an elite minority.”¹⁷ The National Home Reading Union spread across the British Empire.¹⁸ In January 1892 at the Hobart meeting of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science Bishop H. H. Montgomery proposed a home reading union for the colonies.¹⁹ The AHRU was established and a representative committee was formed, with headquarters in Sydney.²⁰ It sought to develop reading habits among non-readers, especially in country areas where books were relatively scarce, but did not achieve much in its short life in Australia.²¹

A similar trajectory was followed by the Tasmanian section of the AHRU, which was formed in March 1892.²² F. J. Young was on the steering committee and spoke for the formation of self-governing local reading circles. The Governor’s wife, Lady Teresa Hamilton, fostered the movement and had formed for the elite women of Hobart the Nil Desperandum Literary Society in 1889.²³ Reading groups affiliated with the AHRU were formed at the Queen’s Domain by Hamilton and in Ulverstone, Launceston, Sandy Bay, Battery Point and New Norfolk. The New Town group was the next to be formed, followed later in 1892 by groups at Holebrook Place, Hagley, Scottsdale, Strahan and Zeehan.²⁴ By November 1892 twenty groups had been formed all around Tasmania, with a total membership of 224. While hard evidence is lacking, it seems that the reading groups were comprised of highly literate middle-class readers rather than the working-class non-readers of limited education that the founders sought to attract, and this finding fits in well with research on Victorian, South Australian and Brisbane reading circles.²⁵

Very little is known about the internal workings of the various Tasmanian reading groups, but it appears that the AHRU petered out in Hobart by 1898

¹⁷ Archie L. Dick, “To make the people of South Africa proud of their membership of the great British Empire’: Home Reading Unions in South Africa, 1900–1914,” *Libraries and Culture* 40 (2005): 5.

¹⁸ Robert Snape, “Reading Across The Empire: The National Home Reading Union Abroad,” in *Reading Communities From Salons to Cyberspace*, ed. D. D. Sedo (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 60–80.

¹⁹ *Mercury* [Hobart, Tasmania], 14 January 1892, 4.

²⁰ *Launceston Examiner*, 18 March 1892, 2.

²¹ Martin Lyons, “Case-Study: The Australasian Home Reading Union, 1892–97,” in *A History of the Book in Australia 1891–1945: A National Culture in a Colonised Market*, ed. Martin Lyons and John Arnold (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2001), 386; John Jenkin, “The Australasian Home Reading Union: Spectacular Rise, Precipitous Fall,” *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia* 38 (2010): 58–72.

²² *Mercury*, 16 March 1892, 3.

²³ Elizabeth Webby, “New Worlds: Australian Readers of the Early 1890s,” *Script and Print* 29 (2005): 356–61.

²⁴ *Mercury*, 29 November 1892, 3.

²⁵ Lurline Stuart, “Case-Study: Private Reading Circles in Victoria,” in Lyons and Arnold, *History of the Book in Australia*, 383; Jenkin, “Australasian Home Reading Union,” 68–69; Leanne Day, “The Brisbane Literary Circle: A Strategy to Elevate the Communal Mind,” *Australian Library Journal* 56 (2007): 392–404.

and in Launceston in 1904.²⁶ This makes the surviving minutes and papers of the New Town circle so valuable. Although the minute book is the major source, it is not clear who wrote the minutes or whether the minutes were approved by the members of the circle. The typed papers do not allow us to match handwriting, but two possibilities can be countenanced. As F. J. Young initiated the group and most meetings were held at his home, it is possible that he wrote up the minutes. That the handwriting changed when he was not present also supports that view.²⁷ The other possibility is more speculative. The minutes and papers of the circle were deposited with the Archives Office of Tasmania by the estate of Olive Burn, the daughter-in-law of circle member William Burn, who might have acted as secretary, but he was present on the occasions when Young was absent and the handwriting changed. The minutes might therefore mostly reflect the views of one person. In what follows I first analyse who attended the meetings, how often they met and how they conducted their meetings. Then I move on to consider what was read and how members reacted to the papers that were delivered. This article focuses on a selection of topics to show the intellectual diversity of the circle's discussions. The Appendix provides a full list of publications and topics discussed at meetings.

Members and Meetings

Holding their first meeting on 7 May 1892, the inaugural members of the reading circle were William Burn, Samuel Clemes, James Hebblethwaite, William Francis Stephens, William Henry Dawson, Francis Joseph Young and Frederick Mortimer Young.²⁸ The circle usually met fortnightly on a Tuesday, mostly at the Youngs' spacious home "Fairfield" in New Town and at other times at the Friends' School, where Clemes was headmaster, or the homes of Stephens, Burn, Dawson or James Backhouse Walker. Walker joined the circle in June 1892 and Andrew Inglis Clark was elected to join in August 1893.²⁹ From time to time visitors were admitted; including James Rule, Matthew Wilkes Simmons, Arthur James Ogilvy, F. W. Piesse, F. Thornley, Samuel Ouston Lovell, Hector Ross, H. H. Young, William Jethro Brown and S. T. Smith.³⁰ Visitors were invited to attend to see

²⁶ Stefan Petrow, *Going to the Mechanics: A History of the Launceston Mechanics' Institute 1842–1914* (Launceston: Historical Survey of Northern Tasmania, 1998), 89.

²⁷ Examples of different handwriting when Young was absent occur in AHRU Minutes, 1 May 1894, 46, 29 January 1895, 57–59 23 July 1895, 72–74, TAHO.

²⁸ Australian Home Reading Union, Copies of papers delivered and minutes of meetings and discussions held at Fairfield, New Town (hereafter AHRU Minutes), 7 May 1892, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 1.

²⁹ AHRU Minutes, 28 June 1892 and 23 August 1893, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 8, 13.

³⁰ AHRU Minutes, 28 June 1892, 9 October 1893, 20 November 1893, 5 December 1893, 13 February 1894, 25 September 1894, 9 October 1893, 29 January 1895, 28 May 1895, 20 August 1895, 11 February 1896, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 8, 35, 38, 39, 53, 54, 57, 68, 76, 82.

if they wanted to become full members and some did, namely Simmons, Piesse, Lovell and H. H. Young, usually for short periods.

The Young brothers initiated the New Town Reading Circle. Born in England in 1847, Francis Young was educated at Leeds Grammar School and Cambridge University, served as assistant master of Cheltenham College, and arrived in Tasmania in 1887.³¹ A “man of means,” he was a founder of the University of Tasmania, exercising “a guiding influence” in its early years as a member of the University Council. In addition to his involvement with the AHRU in Hobart, Young was a member of the Minerva Club, a devotee of the theatre and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Tasmania.³² He suffered from poor health and died in 1922. Born in 1860 and educated at Cheltenham College and Cambridge University, Frederick Young migrated to Tasmania for his health in about 1888 and also supported the University of Tasmania, which he served in many capacities until his death in 1927.³³ He was a trustee of the Tasmanian Public Library and helped reorganise it in late 1894 along with fellow trustees J. B. Walker and his older brother Francis. Frederick was a member of the Minerva Club and a member of the Hobart Technical School Committee. Little is known of H. H. Young, but he might have been Herbert Hammerton Young, brother of Francis and Frederick.³⁴

The other members came from varied backgrounds. Some were businessmen and farmers. Burn was born and educated in Hobart and worked as an auctioneer.³⁵ He was a keen chess player and through this interest probably met the Youngs. He was a member of Clark’s Minerva Club. Piesse was born and educated in Tasmania and tried various occupations before becoming a fruitgrower.³⁶ Another associate of the Minerva Club, he served in the House of Assembly and the Legislative Council between 1893 and 1901 before his election to the House of Representatives. Ogilvy was born in Calcutta, educated there and in England; he arrived in Tasmania in 1851.³⁷ Acquiring property near Richmond, he was a public servant, land reformer and writer on social and economic problems.

³¹ *Mercury*, 18 July 1893, 3, 11 September 1896, 3, 19 July 1922, 6, 8 June 1927, 8; J. A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), vol. VI, Part II, 621; Davis, *Open to Talent*, 25, 28, 30.

³² *Mercury*, 12 May 1887, 1s, 16 March 1892, 3; Theatre Programmes and Records of Theatre Visits by F. J. Young, TAHO NS1899/1/1–4.

³³ *Mercury*, 15 May 1888, 3, 1 February 1893, 2, 5 January 1894, 1s, 8 June 1927, 8, 19 April 1928, 8; *Examiner*, 25 April 1928, 10; Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses*, 622; Davis, *Open to Talent*, 28, 87–88.

³⁴ Copies of Wills Recording Granting of Probate, TAHO AD960/1/46, 296, will number 13828.

³⁵ *Mercury*, 19 April 1928, 8, 3 October 1938, 7, 3 October 1938, 6.

³⁶ Scott Bennett and Barbara Bennett, *Biographical Register of the Tasmanian Parliament 1851–1960* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1980), 133; Neasey and Neasey, *Andrew Inglis Clark*, 65.

³⁷ Anon., “Ogilvy, Arthur James (1834–1914),” *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1974), vol. 5, 359–60; C. D. W. Goodwin, *Economic Enquiry in Australia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1966), 109–10.

Some members were lawyers or worked for law firms. Born and educated in Hobart, Stephens formed a lucrative legal practice with his brother.³⁸ Walker was born in Hobart and educated locally and at the Friends' School, York, England.³⁹ He first worked in his father's bank, but later became a lawyer. He was a founder of the University of Tasmania in 1890, helped reform the Tasmanian Public Library, and was a prominent local historian and bibliophile and member of the Minerva Club. Born and educated in Hobart, Clark became an engineer and later a lawyer.⁴⁰ He entered politics and became a reformist Attorney-General in the Fysh and Braddon Governments between 1887 and 1892 and 1894 and 1897 respectively before becoming a Judge in 1897. He was a noted bibliophile, an enthusiast for all things American and a founder of the University of Tasmania. Simmons was born and educated in Hobart and was articled to Clark, later joining him as a partner.⁴¹ Dawson was born and educated in England and arrived in Hobart in 1884.⁴² He became an accountant for the law firm of Dobson, Mitchell and Allport in 1891 and was a well-known poet. He wrote a page called "Obiter Dicta" for *Walch's Literary Intelligencer*, was a member of the Minerva Club and served on the University Council. Born in South Australia, Brown was a lecturer and later professor in law and modern history at the University of Tasmania.⁴³

The final grouping was comprised of educators. Clemes was born and educated in England, became a teacher and arrived in Hobart to be headmaster of the Friends' School in 1886.⁴⁴ Hebblethwaite was born and educated in England, became a teacher, and arrived in Hobart in 1890 and taught at the Friends' School.⁴⁵ He published a novel in 1895 and later wrote poetry. Rule was born and educated in England, became a teacher and arrived in Tasmania in 1854.⁴⁶ He became headmaster of a number of schools, from 1876 was an inspector of schools and in 1894 was appointed director of education. He was also a founder

³⁸ *Mercury*, 29 November 1909, 6.

³⁹ Neil Smith, "Walker, James Backhouse (1841–1899)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1976), vol. 6, 340–41; *Mercury*, 19 April 1928, 8; Davis, *Open to Talent*, passim.

⁴⁰ Henry Reynolds, "Clark, Andrew Inglis (1848–1907)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1969), vol. 3, 399–401; Davis, *Open to Talent*, passim.

⁴¹ *Mercury*, 28 August 1930, 6.

⁴² *Mercury*, 19 April 1928, 8; Davis, *Open to Talent*, 63.

⁴³ Michael Roe, *William Jethro Brown: An Australian Progressive, 1868–1930* (Hobart: University of Tasmania, 1977). In the minutes Brown's name is sometimes spelt Browne.

⁴⁴ William Nicolle Oats, "Clemes, Samuel (1845–1922)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1981), vol. 8, 27–28; William Nicolle Oats, *The Rose and the Waratah: The Friends' School Hobart 1832–1945* (Hobart: The Friends' School, 1979).

⁴⁵ Hilary Webster, "Hebblethwaite, James (1857–1921)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1983), vol. 9, 251–52.

⁴⁶ John Reynolds, "Rule, James (1830–1901)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1976), vol. 6, 71.

of the University of Tasmania and a member of the Minerva Club. Lovell trained as a teacher and became an inspector of schools in 1892. He was “an authority on English classics” and built up “a comprehensive reference library containing hundreds of books by leading authors in the educational and theological spheres.”⁴⁷ Ross was born in Hobart and educated locally and in Melbourne.⁴⁸ He was a teacher before becoming a public servant, Registrar of the Court of Requests in 1892 and Sheriff in 1899. Little is known of Thornley and Smith.

The eighty-eight meetings recorded in the surviving minute book between 7 May 1892 and 24 March 1896 reveals a core of regular attenders. Frederick Young attended about eighty-six meetings, Dawson eighty-four, Burn eighty-two, Francis Young eighty-one, Clemes seventy-nine and Walker seventy. The attendance of other members was patchy: Stephens fifty, Hebblethwaite thirty-eight, Piesse twenty-four, Clark fourteen, Lovell thirteen, Simmons ten and others fewer than ten.

Francis Young was the most prolific presenter of papers and seems to have been the driving force of the group.⁴⁹ He revealed in his paper on “Wit and Humour” that he had joined a similar society in England, where members also took turns “to inflict papers on the others.”⁵⁰ Members of the earlier society usually apologised for “shortcomings” due to lack of time, which conveyed the impression that they would otherwise “have produced a vastly superior article.” Presenters expected their audiences “to give them credit for the unexhibited ability” and to be “thankful for the little they were about to receive.” This preamble had a point. Young explained to his audience that he had been thinking about his subject for thirty years, but when he attempted to write down his “vague thoughts, ... the scrappy result has annoyed me very much” because it was “such a disgusting proof of incapacity.” Other members of the reading circle were not as candid as Young, but limited time did sometimes at least circumscribe what they had to say.

At times members became dissatisfied with the way meetings were run and the with the subjects that were discussed. In August 1893 the group decided to devote “occasional evenings” to points omitted in discussions of previous subjects, but felt that the discussions should not take up the whole evening.⁵¹ More privately, in his diary the religious J. B. Walker noted that discussions were “agnostic in tone,” “a depressing creed” that he rebelled against “violently.”⁵² In May 1894 the minutes recorded the view that “lately there had been too much of an endeavour to spin

⁴⁷ *Mercury*, 14 September 1938, 8.

⁴⁸ *Mercury*, 12 October 1937, 2.

⁴⁹ At one point the minutes referred to the absent Young as “the Dictator,” AHRU Minutes, 1 May 1894, 46, TAHO.

⁵⁰ Francis Young, “Wit and Humour,” circa 20 December 1892, TAHO NS 256/1/2.

⁵¹ AHRU Minutes, 29 August 1893, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 32.

⁵² Diary of James Backhouse Walker, 2 October 1893, UTA, W9/C3/25.

webs from interior sources.”⁵³ Perhaps this Delphic utterance meant that members were too opinionated and did not explore ideas derived from wide reading.

In November 1894 members “unanimously” agreed to end their “nominal and perfectly useless connection” with the AHRU.⁵⁴ They decided on “a complete change” by introducing “a ‘Go-as-you-please’ Course,” whereby each member would raise “any subject he pleased, introducing it by a reading of selected passages from some author: no paper by the members allowed.” This idea was developed by Francis Young in his paper to the 23 April 1895 meeting called “An Authorised Course of Herrings.”⁵⁵ Each member would suggest between three and five subjects for discussion, “the more varied, the better,” with no subject being “too large” or “too small.” The “Suggester” would introduce each subject by reading “a brief extract, in prose or poetry, from any book, magazine, newspaper etc.” Subjects would be discussed “separately not all together, so far as time and innate tendencies shall permit.” Subjects could be revisited later if a “Suggester” could throw “more light (or the reverse)” on it. Although new subjects would come to members “in their daily reading,” Young thought that “the ideal subject would be something that has long been tossing about in the Suggester’s mental rag-bag, worrying him with a sense of muddle or incomplete ignorance.” Young hoped the new arrangement would “avoid the possible danger of a single subject proving ‘caviare’ to the individual, or insufficient for the evening’s entertainment.” Offering “a judicious variety of subjects” would allow even the oldest members “to suck some interest out of one of them” and provide “a maximum of material with a minimum of preliminary reading,” thus avoiding “a certain degree of inattention” that accompanied lengthy readings. This approach would further what Paton called “Associative Reading,” which meant that all members of the circle would be able to contribute to discussions and “achieve a more complete understanding of the subject.”⁵⁶

Debates and Discussions

The first course tackled by the reading circle was called the English Essayists, which embraced works by such writers as Charles Lamb, Thomas De Quincey, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, and Frederic Harrison. They began with Harrison’s essays in *The Choice of Books and Other Literary Pieces* (1886), which was not of “great merit” but provided “a good introduction” to the course.⁵⁷ The circle thought that Harrison’s advice to avoid “the little books or you won’t have time for the great ones” was “unduly spun out.” Members criticised Harrison’s advice to read Greek and Latin writers in translation. They preferred Matthew

⁵³ AHRU Minutes, 1 May 1894, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 46.

⁵⁴ AHRU Minutes, 13 November 1894, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 55–56.

⁵⁵ AHRU Minutes, 23 April 1895, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 65–66.

⁵⁶ Snape, “National Home Reading Union,” 90.

⁵⁷ AHRU Minutes, 7 May 1892, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 1.

Arnold's advice that readers should gain a "sense of the power and charm of the great poets of antiquity" not by reading translations, but by reading "the original poetry" of Milton, who had similar "power and charm" and "great style." They agreed that Harrison's choice was "far too wide and indiscriminate" for ordinary readers. Some of Harrison's choices were considered "unwise and unprofitable reading," most notably Boccaccio, some of the Italian poets and novels by Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding. They "heartily condemned" Harrison's dismissal of modern poetry and prose by the likes of Tennyson and George Eliot. The major point of difference within the circle was over "the dictum that a book cannot be more than the man who wrote it."

Papers were read on various issues raised in Carlyle's book *Past and Present* (1843).⁵⁸ A long discussion on Herbert Spencer's essay "The Philosophy of Style" (1852) focused on "the logical order of words and thoughts," but "ended in considerable divergence of opinion."⁵⁹ Another long discussion was occasioned by Francis Young's paper on Matthew Arnold's critical methods, which he found deficient because Arnold did not judiciously "weigh the evidence for and against his estimate of a writer," but allowed "his feelings to determine his estimate" and then selected quotations to support his view.⁶⁰ The group agreed that other examples could be selected that would "lead to very different conclusions." Further disagreement ensued over the influence that literary academics had on a nation's writers. The evening concluded with a "short discussion" on Arnold's advice to critics "to stand aloof from the practical work of the world."

After Francis Young presented a paper on "Poetry," the ensuing discussion explored "the relative merits of prose and poetry." Although not unanimous, the group agreed that "poetry was superior to prose for most purposes of expression," that "*form* was necessary to constitute poetry" and that rhyme constrained "thought and expression."⁶¹ In subsequent meetings the members were asked to give an impartial analysis of their favourite poets. Not surprisingly papers were presented on William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, William Morris, John Keats, Robert Browning, and Tennyson.⁶² Two members selected American poets. W. H. Dawson spoke on the Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier and Andrew Inglis Clark on Walt Whitman. According to Clark, Whitman saw that democracy was "no end in itself—only a necessary step to the real culmination," which was "individualism."⁶³ Once democracy had made "all men good citizens," then each

⁵⁸ AHRU Minutes, 17 May 1892, 12 July 1892, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 3, 8.

⁵⁹ AHRU Minutes, 26 July 1892, TAHO NS256/1/1, 11.

⁶⁰ AHRU Minutes, 9 August 1892, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 12–13.

⁶¹ AHRU Minutes, 3 January 1893, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 20 (emphasis in original).

⁶² AHRU Minutes, 17 January 1892, 31 January 1893, 14 February 1893, 28 February 1893, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 20–24.

⁶³ "Notes on Whitman," 31 January 1893, TAHO NS 256/1/2; AHRU Minutes, 31 January 1893, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 22.

man could proceed to “perfect his own nature.” Clark was more interested in what “a prophet and thinker” like Whitman said and its “human interest” but not its “artistic form” and argued that, while Whitman had not written much poetry, what he had written justified his inclusion “amongst the poets of the day.”

The only major playwright to attract attention was William Shakespeare. The group agreed to concentrate on the plays adopted by the Hobart Shakespeare Society, which were *Twelfth Night*, *King Lear*, *Richard III*, *As You Like It* and *Hamlet*.⁶⁴ Over nine meetings from April to August, various members of the group presented papers on different aspects of the plays and the critics who commented on them.⁶⁵

Despite its large population, Francis Young was struck by the “very small crop of eminent writers” that America had produced, but regarded Ralph Waldo Emerson as one.⁶⁶ Young felt that the way Emerson crystallised and phrased his thoughts was his “unequalled gift,” but also noted “traces of sentimental flatulence and straining after effect” in parts of Emerson’s philosophy. In his social essays, Emerson spoke directly and did not sweeten the medicine to suit “the popular taste.” Young gave papers on Emerson’s style, metaphysics and ethics and his essay “The Transcendentalist” (1842).⁶⁷ When Emerson’s essay “The Over-Soul” (1841) was discussed in September 1892, the minutes recorded that members “seemed to have much sympathy for the ideas of one another—and nearly managed to climb the barriers of thought and shake hands all round.”⁶⁸ They agreed “ethically” but not “metaphysically.” While the discussion was “lively,” “the atmosphere was somewhat foggy and dusty.” Emerson’s essay “The Comic” (1876) led to a paper by Francis Young on “Wit and Humour” and the group spent a “pleasant hour” discussing the differences between “wit and humour and swapping stories.”⁶⁹

From August to October 1893 seven meetings focused on philosophical issues. While they planned to discuss various philosophical problems, they were aware that “definite solutions will be quite beyond our power” but nonetheless would tackle them in a “philosophical spirit,” “to see a little further through the fog” or at least “to make up our minds how far we do see at present.”⁷⁰ When they discussed whether the world was good or evil, the members seemed to believe that the world was bad but accepted the idea of meliorism, that human interference could improve the world.⁷¹ The question “What think ye of Christ?” produced, noted the minute book, a “sympathetic and rational” discussion of, and agreement on, a

⁶⁴ AHRU Minutes, 21 March 1893, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 25.

⁶⁵ AHRU Minutes, 7 April 1893, 1 August 1893, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 26, 30–31.

⁶⁶ Francis Young, “Emerson,” 1–3, June 1892, TAHO NS 256/1/2.

⁶⁷ AHRU Minutes, 23 August 1892, 6 September 1892, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 13–14.

⁶⁸ AHRU Minutes, 20 September 1892, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 14–15.

⁶⁹ AHRU Minutes, 20 December 1892, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 19.

⁷⁰ Paper by Francis Young, “Bonism and Malism,” TAHO NS 256/1/2, 1–2.

⁷¹ AHRU Minutes, 15 August 1893, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 31–32.

series of issues including the idealisation and limitation of Christ's character and the interpretation and root ideas of his doctrine, but less agreement on what to teach others to think of Christ.⁷² Walker and Clemes were the only members to believe that "the ideal of Christ was the highest ideal known to humanity" and to hold to "the faith in something outside ourselves ... which was a fact as true as any fact shown by science."⁷³ Faced with the Young brothers' hard-line "agnostic and critically impartial view" and Clark's attack on "evangelical Christianity as an abomination," no wonder Walker was left feeling depressed.

A popular area of discussion was social issues. In June 1892 Francis Young's paper on the "Natural Cure of Our Present Troubles" argued for a social structure "based on the limitations and requirements of human organisation."⁷⁴ Modern life was characterised by "unmanageable complexity, unhealthy anxiety, overwork and haste," which caused an "enormous increase of diseases of the heart, brain and nerves." The solution was in "greater simplicity of life," which accorded with "healthiness and happiness and with the necessary limitations of human power." This prompted a "noisy and excited discussion," with some members agreeing, some undecided, and some arguing for "still greater complexity of life and a continuance of the struggle for existence" as the only solution to "the present wretchedness." Walker recorded in his diary that Young was a self-styled pessimist and "Cassandra," who predicted that the industrial system would "break up" and be followed by "a social revolution."⁷⁵

In October 1893 a meeting on "The Population Question" generated a "very wild" discussion because of "the general ignorance of political economy."⁷⁶ A paper, possibly written by Francis Young, called the population issue "the problem of problems."⁷⁷ Young concluded with "a few hard words" and asked to be pardoned "if out of bitterness of the heart the mouth utters some nasty things." He condemned men for entering the "Temple of Priapus" and public opinion for decreeing that marriage entitled a man "to entertain himself in this holy place, even though ultimately others may have to pay for his amusement." If men were willing to be satisfied with "moderate-sized families" of four or five children and did not emulate "the phallic monster with three times that number," all would find "the struggle of life ... easier," and more "prudent" men would "not feel themselves forced into undesirable abstinence to compensate for the amatory excesses of their less scrupulous neighbours."

⁷² AHRU Minutes, 29 August 1893, 4 September 1893, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 32–33; Francis Young, "What think ye of Christ?," TAHO NS 256/1/2.

⁷³ Diary of James Backhouse Walker, 3 September 1893, UTA W9/C3/25.

⁷⁴ AHRU Minutes, 28 June 1892, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 8–9.

⁷⁵ Peter Benson Walker (ed.), *Prelude to Federation (1884–1898): Extracts From the Journal of James Backhouse Walker* (Hobart: OBM Publishing, 1976), 111.

⁷⁶ AHRU Minutes, 16 October 1893, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 36–37.

⁷⁷ Francis Young, "Population," 5, 10–11, TAHO NS 256/1/2.

Economic issues received some attention. A controversial issue of the late nineteenth century was whether to follow a policy of free trade or protection. Francis Young argued that the greatest objection to protection was that no government could be trusted “not to grossly abuse the system” and indulge in “political dishonesty or incapacity of the worst kind.”⁷⁸ But in theory “a wisely ordered system of Protection” would provide direct economic gains to “many countries.” If Tasmanian ports were “open to the cheap products of the world,” no Tasmanian industry could afford to continue production and the colony would be placed in “a position of unpleasant inferiority both in productive and manufacturing capacity.” Cheap meat and wheat would “soon ruin our farmers.” Young concluded that “the absence of international restrictions on trade” meant that “those who can work and live most cheaply shall inherit the earth.”

Free trade was based on the belief that “removing all artificial restrictions” would allow “natural advantage” to exert “full force,” above all “the cheapest labour consistent with efficiency.”⁷⁹ Cheap labour was available in China and India and would provide stiff competition for American and European workers. Consumers would not be happy paying high prices for locally manufactured goods “out of purely philanthropic and patriotic motives” when “equally good or better articles” were being produced in other countries at lower prices. Young believed that “selfish wisdom” would triumph over “patriotism and self-sacrifice.” If a policy of Free Trade asserted itself, Young was uncertain whether it would result in a lower standard of living, a war between races, “the gradual starvation of the surplus working population of the west” or “the Security of Simplicity.”

Young’s paper engendered a long discussion, but no conclusions were reached and the group decided that it should select smaller subjects for discussion.⁸⁰ They decided that each member could suggest a number of subjects and they would all vote to choose the best. Eleven subjects were selected in the following order: Agnosticism, The Test of Truth, The Supernatural Revival, The Fear of Death, Hopes and Dreams, Natural Rights, New Duties, Conventionality, Ideal Homes, Sermons and Novels and Good Breeding.⁸¹

Before the group embarked on this new course of subjects, Francis Young expatiated on the purpose and method of discussion in a paper read on 13 February 1894.⁸² He argued that true discussion should rest on “the philosophical examination of any unsettled question.” If a member knew his subject fully and had “finally closed his mind about it,” he should “avoid the farce of pretending

⁷⁸ Francis Young, “Free Trade and Protection,” 6–8, 5 December 1893, TAHO NS 256/1/2.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ AHRU Minutes, 5 December 1893, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 38.

⁸¹ AHRU Minutes, 13 February 1894, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 39–40.

⁸² Francis Young, “The Philosophy of Discussion: A Bundle of Platitudes,” 1–2, 3–4, 13 February 1894, TAHO NS 256/1/2.

that the evidence brought before the Court will determine his verdict.” Young believed that two “omniscients” with opposing views on a subject, held with “absolute confidence, cannot properly discuss it—they can merely debate” and “fight” because their aim was “Self-assertion.” For Young, discussion implied a desire to “unite in ‘shaking apart’ the subject” and trying to discover the “previously obscured” truth about it. The discussants should be “content to *think* over problems” and not try to “*solve*” them.⁸³ They should be encouraged “to see the other side.” The greatest enemy of truth was “the dangerous facility given by active jaws and warm prejudices.” Although he admitted that some discussions had been “interesting,” he believed that members had “not been altogether moved by the spirit of sweet reasonableness” and feared that their meetings might “degenerate into the gabble of debate, or, by reaction, into a spiritless swapping of platitudes.” Seeking “a closer analysis of life’s problems,” he wanted members to stop wagging “the tail of our pet prejudices” and adopt “the quiet impartiality of outsiders.” This would entail devoting more attention to “the good that is in things confessedly evil” and to “the evil that is an essential part of our most cherished convictions.”

As an example Young discussed whether the evil of drinking alcohol contained any good for “the advance of humanity.”⁸⁴ He analysed a number of thinkers, but concentrated on Herbert Spencer’s works, especially *A Plea for Liberty: An Argument Against Socialism and Socialistic Arguments* (1891). Young concluded that Spencer had highlighted “the weakness of the total-abstinence doctrine” when viewed as “a question of moral theory,” but threw “little light on the problem from the point of view of a practical moral policy,” which Young thought was a more “profitable” area of discussion. The group agreed that legislation against drunkenness was “worse than useless” and thought that the Gothenberg system would be a more effective “cure.”⁸⁵ This required the provision of “pure, light alcoholic drinks” and “a heavy tax on the stronger sorts.” The State should stop abuses like adulteration and the rest should be left to “Natural Reform.”

The circle embarked on its new course and tried to follow Young’s precepts. Papers on “The Test of Truth” and “The Supernatural Revival” presented different sides to those subjects.⁸⁶ At the end of a long discussion on the supernatural, Dawson asked whether, if spiritualists could prove what they said was true, that would change belief in “a future life?” The believers said it would make “no particular difference,” “the agnostics” that it would make “an immense difference,” but Dawson, although “an agnostic,” said it would make “practically” no difference to him. He justified this position by distinguishing between “intellectual belief,

⁸³ Ibid. (emphasis in original).

⁸⁴ Francis Young, “The Philosophy of Discussion: A Bundle of Platitudes,” 5–10, 13 February 1894, TAHO NS 256/1/2.

⁸⁵ AHRU Minutes, 13 February 1894, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 39.

⁸⁶ AHRU Minutes, 20 March 1894, 3 April 1894, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 42.

founded on objective evidence, and emotional belief, founded on consciousness,” but failed to persuade the meeting to agree.⁸⁷

Another series of subjects bearing on economic and financial problems were discussed between 29 May and 23 October 1894. This broached subjects such as competition, unearned increment, state improved value of land, the importance of manual labour and ability in production, co-operative stores and the cash system, land nationalisation, taxation and saving.⁸⁸ In his paper on “Class,” Francis Young departed from his precept of “sweet reasonableness” and consciously indulged in “the luxury of a little strong language.”⁸⁹ He did not care if he slipped into “brutal outspokenness” or “appeared one-sided and unfair.” Influenced by his “favourite philosopher” Herbert Spencer’s chapter on “Class-Bias” in his book *The Study of Sociology* (1873), Young found “All class-character detestable.” He believed that “class privileges, class distinctions, manners, customs and feelings” contained “nothing but evil.” They were “the enemies of the public peace, and the separators of man from man.” He argued that “class instinct” was “the fruitful parent of jealousy, antipathy and ill-will.” As a “true democrat” who believed in “Fraternity,” the word class was “a concise expression for the political and social evil” he abhorred. The minutes of the meeting described the paper as “short and abusive.”⁹⁰

After the Australasian Home Reading Union

As noted above, in November 1894 the circle moved away from long formal papers to brief papers which started with the presenter reading selected passages from his chosen author. A meeting on “Realism in Fiction” included readings from Henri-Frédéric Amiel’s *Journal in Time* (1885), the newly published *The Yellow Book: An Illustrated Quarterly* (c. 1894) and George Eliot’s 1856 essay on the German novelist Wilhelm Riehl.⁹¹ The new format did not always provide “very definite or luminous conclusions.”⁹² Somewhat illuminating were the reasons members gave for reading during a discussion of Philip Gilbert Hamerton’s *Intellectual Life* (1873). These included “pleasure,” “instruction,” “curiosity” and “conduct.”⁹³ While they all “disagreed with one another,” the minutes recorded that they “probably all meant the same thing.”

In March 1895 Andrew Inglis Clark set himself the hard task of conveying the ideas raised by Josiah Royce in *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* (1885).⁹⁴ While Clark persuaded members of “the many beauties” of Royce’s “Ethical and

⁸⁷ AHRU Minutes, 17 April 1894, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 43–44.

⁸⁸ AHRU Minutes, 29 May 1894, 23 October 1894, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 47, 55.

⁸⁹ Francis Young, “Class,” 14 August 1894, TAHO NS 256/1/2.

⁹⁰ AHRU Minutes, 14 August 1894, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 52.

⁹¹ AHRU Minutes, 27 November 1894, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 56–57.

⁹² AHRU Minutes, 29 January 1895, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 57–59.

⁹³ AHRU Minutes, 26 February 1895, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 60.

⁹⁴ AHRU Minutes, 12 March 1895, 26 March 1895, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 60–63.

Religious thoughts,” they were “quite unable to accept his metaphysics.”⁹⁵ In reply Clark highlighted a problem with the focus on selected readings from thinkers, positing that “extracts from a large work ought not to be regarded as giving the full argument: they can only sample it.”

While the discussions of the reading circle were astonishingly wide-ranging, we are not told how members acquired the books they discussed. As most members were book buyers, many books must have come from their personal libraries and some were found in local libraries as was the case with other reading circles.⁹⁶ In May 1895 members of the circle voted on books they wanted to buy for their newly formed Polygon Book Club.⁹⁷ The choice of the word Polygon reflected their desire to discuss subjects from many sides. They selected twenty books covering politics, political philosophy, philosophy, ancient and modern history, religion and commentaries on writers and poets. Members nominated what books they would pay for or contribute to the cost of, but presumably the books were handed around to interested members. The list was later reduced to thirteen books, which members voted for on “the now-thoroughly-understood Hare system,” a method of electing politicians that Clark had helped to develop.⁹⁸

While it is not always clear that the books chosen were the centrepieces of future meetings, the circle roamed widely in its discussions of herrings: literature, political philosophy, crime, religion, democracy, education and socialism were some of the subjects discussed more or less thoroughly between 28 May and 17 September 1895.⁹⁹ But an undercurrent of dissatisfaction remained, as Francis Young indicated. In October 1895 he presented a paper, which he called a “sermon,” entitled “The Higher Laglallypop: A Gentle Attempt at Iconoclasm.” He described Laglallypop, a term he derived from an American “comic story,” as “an intellectual disease,” which consisted “in feebleness of expression, in dealing with ready-made phrases, in sentimental platitudes, in thought that outrages common sense” and in “other weaknesses” that all made for “falsehood.”¹⁰⁰ Young explained the emergence of Laglallypop this way: “In the hotbed of Human Ignorance the Sentimental seduced the Attractive and their Offspring was the Higher Laglallypop.” To think and speak “truly” required freedom from “the trammels of Laglallypop,” “a subtle poison, which we all too frequently sip at.” To combat it required “Courage in thought, freedom from prejudice, scepticism about sentiment, and, above all, a keen sense of humour.” In a postscript, Young

⁹⁵ AHRU Minutes, 23 April 1895, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 65.

⁹⁶ Francis Young mentioned using the Public Library, *Mercury*, 26 April 1893, 4.

⁹⁷ AHRU Minutes, 14 May 1895, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 67–68; Stuart, “Case-Study: Private Reading Circles in Victoria,” 383.

⁹⁸ AHRU Minutes, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 86.

⁹⁹ AHRU Minutes, 28 May 1895 to 17 September 1895, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 68, 76–77.

¹⁰⁰ Francis Young, “The Higher Laglallypop: A Gentle Attempt at Iconoclasm,” 1–3, 16, 1 October 1895, NS 256/1/2; AHRU Minutes, 1 October 1895, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 77–78.

explained that “the modes of feeling and expression” which he called the “Higher Laglallypop” were “so many obstacles to our realisation of Truth.” No one seems to have dissented from Young’s propositions and the meeting agreed that the most suitable definition of the “Higher Laglallypop” was “overstatement prompted by sentiment” and examples of such thinking were taken from “the laggish outpourings of religious emotion and from popular politics.”¹⁰¹

Another clue that the members felt uneasy about the way their meetings were conducted came from papers by Francis Young and Dawson on what constituted “good talk, and the best topics” in February 1896.¹⁰² They insisted on “the need for sympathy, intimate friendship between [*sic*] the members of the company, and patient listening.” After an “animated” discussion, the meeting decided “to test the merits of Spontaneity and Preparation” in future meetings. At the next meeting members decided on topics to be subjected to “spontaneous and prepared conversations,” which members would select by lot.¹⁰³ The next meeting, held on 24 March 1896 to discuss Francis Young’s paper on the nature of the criminal problem, was the last recorded in the minute book.¹⁰⁴ The text of a talk on “The Financial Aspect of Federation, from a Tasmanian Standpoint” was dated 14 April 1898, but there is no evidence that this was presented at a meeting of the group.¹⁰⁵

Other preoccupations took over and this explains why the meetings stopped. The Young brothers, Clark and Walker became heavily involved in different ways in the University of Tasmania and saved it from being wrecked by the failure of politicians to fund it adequately and by the anti-elitist views of radicals.¹⁰⁶ Their efforts became focused on helping young Tasmanians gain exposure to the intellectual currents of the day that had given the New Town Reading Circle so much pleasure and lively discussion.

Conclusion

In their magisterial history of reading Cavallo and Chartier stress that reading as a practice was “always realized in specific acts, places and habits” and that one of the main tasks of historians should be to “identify the specific distinctive traits of communities of readers, reading traditions and ways of reading.”¹⁰⁷ This article contributes to this aim by an empirical analysis of the activities of the well-to-do middle-class members of the New Town Reading Circle in 1890s Hobart. The article has given a sense of why the group was formed, how a real community of

¹⁰¹ AHRU Minutes, 15 October 1895, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 78–79.

¹⁰² AHRU Minutes, 25 February 1896, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 83.

¹⁰³ AHRU Minutes, 10 March 1896, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 83–84.

¹⁰⁴ AHRU Minutes, 24 March 1896, TAHO NS 256/1/1, 85.

¹⁰⁵ TAHO, NS 256/1/2.

¹⁰⁶ Davis, *Open to Talent*, 34–40, 44–45, 49–52.

¹⁰⁷ Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, “Introduction,” in *A History of Reading in the West*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 2.

readers was linked to “real texts” and the strategies they used to choose and discuss texts.¹⁰⁸ Although circle members gained much pleasure and excitement from reading, they took reading seriously as a way of entering the world of ideas, of understanding the changing world around them and of shedding new light on old intellectual and social problems.¹⁰⁹ While literary subjects were mainly discussed in early meetings, members spent most of their time discussing the leading social, political, philosophical and religious writers of the nineteenth century. The members adopted an academic approach to their reading reminiscent of the Special Courses section of the National Home Reading Union.¹¹⁰

Although they used books to enlighten themselves on a variety of subjects, members were not reticent to vent their own opinions. F. J. Young was the extreme case and his exhortations to the group bore traces of hypocrisy. On the one hand he urged the group to discuss issues with impartiality, but on the other sometimes imposed his personal views on the group in the strongest terms. The candid way in which members expressed their views would not have been possible in the public sphere and, as most readers are inclined to do, Young made the most of the opportunity to “re-work and re-imagine” texts to bolster his own perspective on social and political challenges.¹¹¹ Another interpretation of Young’s responses is that he was typical of the nineteenth-century educated reader who reacted to texts in different ways, sometimes intellectually, sometimes emotionally and sometimes humorously.

As active readers, perhaps the members of the reading circle were more preoccupied than most such groups with “the question of *how* to read, as well as the related issue of *what* to read.”¹¹² They were highly reflective about their reading practices and ways of communicating, seeking to maximise the benefits from the ideas they derived from reading. They realised that there was no one ideal way to get the most out of reading and discussions and were willing to experiment with different formats, but none seems to have fully met their expectations for deeper understanding. Although all members were expected to contribute, all reading circles needed a leader and the mantle fell on F. J. Young to initiate and structure many discussions. He was clearly frustrated that members debated from an already formed opinion or mouthed platitudes rather than mulled over all sides of an issue.

¹⁰⁸ Christine Pawley, “Seeking ‘Significance’: Actual Readers, Specific Reading Communities,” *Book History* 5 (2002): 147.

¹⁰⁹ Generally see Robert Darnton, *The Kiss of the Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1990), 154–87.

¹¹⁰ Stimpson, “Reading in Circles,” 55.

¹¹¹ Martyn Lyons, *A History of Reading and Writing in the Western World* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3.

¹¹² Kylie Mirmohamadi, “The ‘Federation of Literary Sympathy’: The Australian Home Reading Union,” in *Republics of Letters: Literary Communities in Australia*, ed. Peter Kirkpatrick and Robert Dixon (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2012), 19 (emphasis in original).

This article began by claiming that the members of the New Town Reading Circle could be regarded as intellectuals and were therefore different from the usual members of such groups. Certainly, the most regular attenders did evince what Hamerton suggested were the hallmarks of intellectual living in their “preference for higher thoughts over lower thoughts” and in their search for “the highest and purest truth.”¹¹³ To be sure, the discussions often failed to satisfy circle members, rarely reached such lofty heights and sometimes were driven by emotions and not intellect, but their efforts and the breadth of their intellectual perambulations deserve recognition.

University of Tasmania

¹¹³ Hammerton, *Intellectual Life*, x.

Appendix

This appendix lists the topics and published work discussed by the New Town Reading Circle and the papers given at meetings as recorded in the sole surviving minute book at NS256/1/1. Those marked with an asterisk indicate the survival of a full text, not always with an indication of the author, at NS256/1/2.

7 May 1892, p. 1

Discussion: Frederic Harrison, *The Choice of Books and Other Literary Pieces* (1886)*

17 May 1892, p. 3

Discussion: Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (1843)

Papers by Samuel Clemes and F. J. Young
Subjects discussed: "Justice" and "Fair Day's Wage for a Fair Day's Work"

31 May 1892, pp. 4–5

Discussion: Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (1843)

Subject discussed: "Government by the Wise, the Unwise and Otherwise"
F. J. Young paper on "Carlyle's Pill= Caesarism or The Hero-Cure"

14 June 1892, pp. 5–7

Discussion: Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (1843)

F. J. Young paper on "The Difficulties of Election"

28 June 1892, pp. 8–10

Discussion: Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (1843)

F. J. Young paper on "The Natural Cure of Our Present Troubles"

12 July 1892, pp. 10–11

Discussion: Frederic Harrison (1885), James Russell Lowell (1866) and Giuseppe Mazzini's (1891) essays on Carlyle
F. J. Young paper on "Justice"*

26 July 1892, pp. 11–12

Discussion: Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864)

Discussion: Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Literary Ethics" (1838) and "Inspiration" (n.d.)

Discussion: Herbert Spencer, "The Philosophy of Style" (1852)

John Hebblethwaite and F. J.

Young papers on "Style"*

9 August 1892, pp. 12–13

Discussion: Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864)

Discussion: Matthew Arnold, "The Literary Influence of Academics" (1864)

F. J. Young paper on "A Weak Point in Matthew Arnold's Critical Method"

23 August 1892, p. 13

F. J. Young paper on "Emerson"

6 September 1892, p. 14

Discussion: Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Transcendentalist" (1842) and "Nominalist and Realist" (1844)

F. J. Young paper on "Transcendentalism"*

20 September 1892, pp. 14–15

Discussion: Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Over-Soul" (1841)

4 October 1892, p. 15

F. J. Young paper on Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Man the Reformer" (1841)

18 October 1892, p. 16

Discussion: Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Domestic Life" (1843) and "Farming" (n.d.)

William Burn paper on "Luxury in [A.] Nacquet's Collectivism"

F. J. Young paper on "Luxury"

1 November 1892, pp. 16–17

Discussion: Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Conservative" (1841)

W. H. Dawson paper on "Luxury"

F. J. Young paper on "Compliance with Evil"

15 November 1892, pp. 17–18

Discussion: John Ruskin, "Unto This Last" (1860)

F. J. Young paper on "The Mistakes of Political Economists"

29 November 1892, pp. 18–19

Discussion: John Ruskin, "Unto This Last" (1860)

F. J. Young paper on "Ruskin"

20 December 1892, p. 19

Discussion: Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Comic" (1876) and "Quotation and Originality" (1859)

F. J. Young paper on "Wit and Humour"*

W. H. Dawson paper on "Quotation and Originality"

3 January 1893, pp. 19–20

Discussion: Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination" (1872)

F. J. Young paper on "Poetry"*

17 January 1893, pp. 20–22

Series of papers on "Our Favourite Poets"

William Burn paper on "Wordsworth"

W. F. Stephens paper on "Byron"

W. H. Dawson paper on "Whittier"

31 January 1893, pp. 22–23

A. I. Clark paper on "Whitman"*

F. M. Young paper on "W. Morris"

John Hebblethwaite paper on "Keats"

14 February 1893, pp. 23–24

Samuel Clemes paper on "Browning"

F. J. Young paper on "Browning"*

J. B. Walker paper on "Tennyson"

28 February 1893, p. 24

Discussion: "Tennyson"

21 March 1893, p. 25

F. J. Young paper on "The Study of Shakespeare"

7 April 1893, p. 26

Discussion: Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" (1623)

18 April 1893, p. 26

Discussion: Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" (1623)

2 May 1893, p. 27

Discussion: Shakespeare's "King Lear" (1608)

16 May 1893, pp. 27–28

Discussion: Shakespeare's "King Lear" (1608)

30 May 1893, p. 28

Discussion: Shakespeare's "King Lear" (1608)

F. J. Young papers on "The Three Sisters" and "Edmund"

13 June 1893, pp. 28–29

Discussion: Shakespeare's "Richard III" (1597)

F. J. Young paper on "Shakespeare's

Treatment of English History"

John Hebblethwaite paper on

"The Child Princess"

23 June 1893, p. 29

F. J. Young paper on "The Character of Richard III"

18 July 1893, p. 30

Discussion: Shakespeare's "As You Like It" (1623)

F. J. Young papers on "Wit and Humour of Shakespeare" and "Jacques"

F. M. Young paper on "Rosalind"

J. B. Walker read a paper "by a Lady" on "The Children in the Plays"

1 August 1893, pp. 30–31

Discussion: Shakespeare's "Hamlet" (1603)

F. J. Young paper on "Madness"

John Hebblethwaite paper on "Character"

Samuel Clemes on Goethe's

criticisms of Hamlet from *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (n.d.)

15 August 1893, pp. 31–32

Discussion: "Bonism and Malism"

Papers by F. J. Young, William

Burn and W. H. Dawson

Short notes by John Hebblethwaite and F. M. Young

29 August 1893, pp. 32–33

Discussion: "What think ye of Christ?"

Papers by John Hebblethwaite,

W. H. Dawson and F. J. Young*

4 September 1893, p. 33

Discussion: Religion

Papers by James Backhouse Walker,
F. M. Young and F. J. Young

19 September 1893, pp. 33–34

William Henry Dawson paper on
“The Unnecessary Cares of Life”
F. J. Young paper on “Improvvidence”

3 October 1893, pp. 34–35

Discussion: “The Scientific Basis of Morals”^{*}
Papers by Samuel Clemes, F. J.
Young and W. H. Dawson

9 October 1893, pp. 35–36

F. J. Young paper on “The Genesis
and Growth of Conscience”
F. M. Young paper on “The Origins
of Senses and Characteristics”
A. I. Clark paper on “The Data of Ethics”
F. J. Young paper on “The
Testimony of Language”

16 October 1893, pp. 36–37

Discussion: “The Population Question”^{*}
Papers by F. M. Young, F. J.
Young and W. H. Dawson

7 November 1893, p. 37

Discussion: “Gambling”
Papers by J. B. Walker, F. J.
Young and W. H. Dawson

20 November 1893, p. 38

Discussion: “Taxation”
Papers by F. M. Young and F. J. Young

5 December 1893, p. 38

Discussion: “Free Trade”^{*}
Papers by F. J. Young, W. F.
Stephens and William Burn

13 February 1894, p. 39–40

F. J. Young paper “The Philosophy of
Discussion: A Bundle of Platitudes”^{*}

27 February 1894, p. 41

F. J. Young paper “The Ethics of Agnosticism”^{*}

20 March 1894, p. 42

Discussion: “The Test of the Truth”
Papers by W. H. Dawson and F. J. Young^{*}

3 April 1894, pp. 42–43

Discussion: “The Supernatural Revival”^{*}
Papers by F. J. Young and W. H. Dawson

17 April 1894, pp. 43–44

Discussion: “The Supernatural Revival”^{*}

1 May 1894, pp. 45–46

Papers by F. M. Young and W. H.
Dawson on “Ideal Homes”

15 May 1894, p. 47

Discussion: “Conventionality”
Paper by F. J. Young

29 May 1894, pp. 47–48

Discussion: “The Causes of the Present
Social and Financial Unrest”
W. H. Dawson paper Edward Carpenter,
Civilisation: Its Cause and Cure (1889)
Discussion: “Credit” and “Money”^{*}

12 June 1894, p. 48

F. J. Young paper “Competition”^{*}

26 June 1894, pp. 48–49

F. J. Young paper “Increased Increment”
F. W. Piessie paper “State
Improved Value of Land”

10 July 1894, pp. 49–50

Discussion: “The Relative Importance
of Manual Labour and Ability in
Production” in William Hurrell Mallock’s
Labour and Popular Welfare (1893)^{*}
Discussion: “Ideal Justice”^{*}
Papers by F. J. Young and W. H. Dawson

24 July 1894, pp. 50–51

Discussion: “Trades Unions”^{*}
Discussion: “Apportionment of
Products, by the Formula Products =
Interest + Wages + Rent + Profits”
F. J. Young paper on “Distribution”^{*}

7 August 1894, p. 51

Discussion: “Misdirection of Labour”^{*}
and “Congestion (of Wealth)”^{*}
Papers by F. J. Young and W. H. Dawson

14 August 1894, p. 52

F. J. Young paper “Class”^{*}

F. J. Young paper "Pathology of Complexity"*

11 September 1894, pp. 52–53

F. J. Young paper "Land Nationalisation"*

25 September 1894, pp. 53–54

F. J. Young paper "Politics"*

W. H. Dawson paper "The N. T. System of Elections"

Discussion: "How to fill up an Income Tax Return"

9 October 1894, p. 54

Discussion: "Taxation"

Papers by F. J. Young and F. M. Young

23 October 1894, p. 55

Discussion: "What Does Modern Saving, in its Ordinary Form, Really Amount to?"

Papers by F. J. Young, Samuel Clemes, W. H. Dawson and F. M. Young

13 November 1894, pp. 55–56

Discussion: "The Causes of this Thusness"

27 November 1894, pp. 56–57

Discussion: "Realism in Fiction"

W. H. Dawson read from Henri-Frédéric Amiel's *Journal in Time* (1885)

Samuel Clemes read from *The Yellow Book: An Illustrated Quarterly* on "Modern Realism" (c.1894)

F. J. Young read from George Eliot's essay on the German novelist Wilhelm Riehl (1856).

29 January 1895, pp. 57–59

William Burn read from Walter Bagehot's "Emotion of Conviction" (1871)

12 February 1895, p. 59

J. B. Walker read from John Fiske, "The Causes of Persecution" (1883)

26 February 1895, p. 60

Discussion: "Three Letters on Education" from P. G. Hamerton, *The Intellectual Life* (1873)

12 March 1895, pp. 60–61

Discussion: John Stuart Mill, "Utility of Religion" (1874)

26 March 1895, pp. 62–63

Discussion: John Stuart Mill, "Utility of Religion" (1874)

Papers by W. H. Dawson and F. J. Young*

9 April 1895, p. 64

Samuel Clemes read from the letter "Aristocracy and Democracy" from P. G. Hamerton, *The Intellectual Life* (1873)

Papers by F. J. Young on "Aristotle"* and "The Ethics of Hatred"*

23 April 1895, p. 65

A. I. Clark read from Josiah Royce, *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* (1885)

30 April 1895, p. 67

F. W. Piesse read from Walter Bagehot, "The Ignorance of Man" (1862)

14 May 1895, p. 68

W. H. Dawson read from Paul Bourget's articles in the *New Review* on "The Limits of Realism in Fiction" (1893) and "The Dangers of the Analytical Spirit in Modern Fiction" (1892)

28 May 1895, pp. 68–69

F. J. Young offered four "herrings":

- 1) "An Apology for Idlers" (extracts from Robert Louis Stevenson and Henry David Thoreau)
- 2) "The Will of the People" (extracts from John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859) and Ernest Belfort Bax)
- 3) Cesare Lombroso's "new theory of political crime"
- 4) "The Intellectual Value of Sin" (from some articles in the *International Journal of Ethics*)

11 June 1895, pp. 69–70

W. H. Dawson read from Epictetus on the Stoics

Discussion: "Is Repentance Logical"

W. H. Dawson read William Hurrell Mallock, "Atheism and Repentance" (1880)

Discussion: "Is Theism a Religion?"

W. H. Dawson read Frederic Harrison, "The Creeds Old and New" (1880)

25 June 1895, pp. 71–72

William Burn read extracts from Canon Malcolm MacColl on "Morality in Fiction" (1891) and a passage from Arthur Schopenhauer, "On Criticism" (1891)

23 July 1895, pp. 72–74

J. B. Walker read extracts from James Russell Lowell, "Democracy" (1884) and James Anthony Froude, "Education" (1867)

6 August 1895, p. 75

F. M. Young read extracts from Herbert Spencer, "Education" (1861)
 Samuel Clemes read extracts from J. R. Seeley, "Goethe" (1884)
 F. M. Young read extracts from *The Times* on state socialism (n.d.)

20 August 1895, p. 76

Samuel Clemes read notes on "The Rights of Man," "Popular Art," "Oscar Wilde," "Rational Dress" and "The Treatment of Criminals"

3 September 1895, p. 76

F. J. Young summarised William Hurrell Mallock, *Social Equality* (1882)
 W. H. Dawson read extracts from his paper of 19 September 1893 "The Unnecessary Cares of Life"
 Discussion: "Socialism and Its Impracticability"

17 September 1895, pp. 76–77

S. O. Lovell introduced three subjects:
 1) "a criticism of work on the harmful influences of improvements in medicine and hygiene"
 2) Lovell read extracts from Ernest Belfort Bax, "Some Forms of Modern Cant" (1889)
 3) Dr. Alfred William Momerie, "Clerical Untruthfulness" (1893)

1 October 1895, pp. 77–78

F. J. Young paper "The Higher Laglallypop"*

15 October 1895, pp. 78–79

F. J. Young paper "The Higher Laglallypop"*

29 October 1895, pp. 79–80

Discussion: R. M. Johnston, "Cost of Production, the Primary Law of Value" (c. 1894/5)

19 November 1895, p. 81

Discussion: Bimetallism
 F. J. Young summarised F. A. Walker's views on bimetallism from Walker's *Political Economy* (1883)

10 December 1895, pp. 81–82

Discussion: Bimetallism

11 February 1896, p. 82

Discussion: "Style"
 Papers by W. H. Dawson and F. J. Young

25 February 1896, p. 83

Discussion: "Aro Colloquendi"
 Papers by F. J. Young and W. H. Dawson

10 March 1896, pp. 83–85

Discussion: "Style"
 F. J. Young read extracts from Edward Dowden, "The Interpretation of Literature" (1886)
 W. H. Dawson read extracts from John Addington Symonds, *Essays: Speculative and Suggestive* (1890)
 Paper by S. T. Smith read by F. M. Young

24 March 1896, p. 85

Discussion: Criminal Problems
 Paper by F. J. Young