

knowledge” (112). She links Aubrey’s method to that of Robert Hooke’s enormously popular *Micrographia* (1665) and sees this delight in minutiae as part of a larger cultural pattern, a fascination with knowledge that “claims no public relevance and seeks no argument” (96). Although quite different from Walton’s lives, Walkden argues, Aubrey’s work, like the previous texts she has considered, protects “familiar knowledge ... from rational examination or critical scrutiny” (96).

Finally, Walkden turns to Daniel Defoe’s *Memoirs of a Cavalier* (1720), in which she finds both the backstory for *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and an alternative to the Earl of Clarendon’s *History of the Rebellion* (1702–4), a counter-narrative to his extraordinarily influential work. Walkden sees in Defoe’s text a far less romantic side of the cavalier and a satirical rewriting of Charles II’s narrow escape from the battle of Worcester. While not every point in this intricate final chapter persuaded me (for example, the assertion that in adding character sketches to the otherwise finished narrative of book 1, Clarendon intended a return to classical epic), it certainly reinforces the overall thesis: that in this period, biographical narratives were used to dull the edges of political disagreement, and that in their appeals to nostalgia for a simpler, more traditional world, they separated beliefs and convictions from actual conflict. In the sequence of texts she considers, Walkden finds a movement toward populism, noting that “biography triumphed in popular political discourse because it was able to resist, despite its often radically conservative leanings, the form or appearance of argument,” and “through its routing of political beliefs through personal life stories, was able to exert a regressive influence over public culture” (130–31).

The benefits of Walkden’s study are clear: well informed by earlier scholarship and moving beyond it, she offers a fresh and careful examination of texts already well known, teasing out nuances in its reading (like the illuminating analysis of the shifting meanings of *descant* in her discussion of *Eikon Basilike* and *Eikonoklastes*). On the other hand, the very subtlety and nuance of her approach, while providing rich insights, sometimes lessens its drive and forcefulness. One is grateful for the knowledge gained, even if one might wish for a somewhat stronger argumentative line throughout. But that method might run counter to the temperament and talent of Walkden, who places the familiar in a new context, and by examining works that purported to have no argument, makes a useful and illuminating case of her own.

I note, finally, my deep regret at the closing of the very distinguished Duquesne University Press, which has brought us so much thoughtful and important scholarship, of which this is one of the last examples.

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ABIGAIL WILLIAMS. *The Social Life of Books: Reading Together in the Eighteenth-Century Home*. Lewis Walpole Series in Eighteenth-Century Culture and History. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017. Pp. 352. \$40.00 (cloth).
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Abigail Williams’s engaging exploration of eighteenth-century reading creates an admirably coherent map that enables its readers to navigate an otherwise perplexingly diverse terrain. Types of text, reader, and context vary, multiply, and interlock throughout *The Social Life of Books* with startling versatility. Williams adopts a light touch in deploying her rich scholarly knowledge to present, appropriately, a highly readable account of practices that may now be obscure to modern-day readers, whether general or specialist. She aims to create a “history of sociable reading” that thinks about the what, who, when, how, where, and with whom,

alongside the practicalities characterizing the domestic settings that are her main focus that are perhaps otherwise easy to forget.

Williams's first chapter, "How to Read," reminds us of how very differently eighteenth-century readers engaged with texts. Their understanding of what constituted "good" subject matter and its reading alike was typically informed by a keen interest in the art of elocution—including sermon giving, oratory, and reading aloud—and that took the orality of the text as read. The desire to infuse feeling into one's reading—and to prompt an emotive response in an audience—aligns the printed text with stage practice, and the successful market for acting manuals depicting how to use speech and gesture, but also for elocution manuals that guided readers how to pronounce the words on the page. As Williams suggests, building on recent scholarship, reading was not a solitary activity, but one whose presuppositions about what a text was and how to engage with it depended on appreciating its oral qualities, and on accessing them as a shared experience. This theme is developed further still in "Reading and Sociability," in which Williams thinks about how social practices (such as visiting) and the domestic interior in which reading took place signally shaped how it was performed and experienced. Everything from floor space to furniture to lighting created a domestic scene for reading's multidimensional performativity, while Williams offers a very brief glance at "sociable reading" (3) beyond the home: in coffeehouses, circulating libraries, and the open air.

In "Using Books" Williams examines in closer detail how sociable reading determined a distinctive array of practices that challenged the notion of what "a text" is: not "just" full-length books, but anthologies, abridgements, newspapers, extracts, parts of longer works, all featured in the quite literal miscellany of reading materials available to a wide social spectrum of readers in this period, often encouraging browsing rather than continuous reading within a culture of reading aloud and of reading together. In "Access to Reading" Williams takes us to the libraries (domestic and commercial), book clubs, and other forums for coming into contact with books and sharing ideas about them, reinforced by epistolary correspondence. Physically borrowing books links into textual borrowing, explored in "Verse at Home," where domestic compilations of texts mirrored the parodic practices freely deployed by writers throughout this period. "Drama and Recital" revisits some of Williams's earlier discussions of orality and performance in the context of home theatricals, and the suspicions it aroused among some moral commentators of the day, while in "Fictional Worlds" Williams probes similarly virulent fears about the potential dangers of solitary novel reading, particularly for young women.

For all the evidence demonstrating the shared, communal experience of social reading—including that of novels—the temptations of quixotic, solipsistic indulgence in fiction nevertheless bled into the public discourse surrounding reading. Social reading could, to some degree, mitigate these anxieties; but, as Williams points out, our assumptions about the typical female novel reader could risk being one-sided if we forget (among other things) that men enjoyed novels just as much as women. She suggests that the inherent links between prose fiction and drama created a sometimes even more pressing concern about how to deliver "character" and effect than the dangers of novel reading. "Piety and Knowledge" turns to the much larger array of nonfiction texts that populated the eighteenth-century market and that readers sought out more avidly than they did novels: history books and sermons were among the most-published and most-circulated texts in this period, and their domestic consumption reinforced important self-instruction. The social reading of such texts made engaging with their moral purpose a shared enterprise among family members and small communities centered on the home.

Each chapter closes with a paragraph summarizing its main points and conclusions, perhaps the better to guide general readers less familiar with this material. While embedded in extensive research, as the endnotes and bibliography indicate, the text itself is light on critical names and quotations, no doubt with this general reader in mind. This might also account for why Williams occasionally skims over terrain that would have welcomed a more detailed discussion. This might be the effect of the sheer range of such an enquiry, albeit one mostly focused on

the mid to latter part of the period. Williams nevertheless weaves together a breadth of materials, concepts, and sources with deceptive ease to create a cheerfully energetic, fast-paced narrative. Rather than critical texts, she privileges quotations from a wide variety of primary sources, with a lively presence of diaries, letters, and other firsthand accounts of reading, to bring its experience, described in the words of those who undertook it, constantly to the present-day reader's attention. Williams is, after all, very conscious of who readers are and how they read, then and now. The effect is to create a familiarity with these eighteenth-century readers, and with the activity of reading, to reinforce Williams's concluding suggestion that this world was "perhaps not so far from our own as we like to think" (278). The sum total is a volume that informs and engages across a broad spectrum of a supposed readership; it offers a comprehensive introduction to this period and terrain for those who are unfamiliar with them, and consolidation of existing knowledge for those who are not—plus more than a few revelations. It is, indeed, a book well worth reading.

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EVAN WILSON. *A Social History of British Naval Officers, 1775–1815*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2017. Pp. 294. \$120.00 (cloth).
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This book is a quantitative study focusing on the careers of naval officers. It pursues, in-depth, the question of whether—as some contemporaries claimed—the navy was “overrun by the younger branches of nobility” (108), and to what extent individuals from a lower social background found their progress impeded. To examine these and related questions, Evan Wilson created two large databases. The first database, of commissioned officers, was a randomly selected sample of 556 men; the second, of warrant officers (chaplains, pursers, masters, and surgeons) consisted of 400 men. As Wilson notes, this represents a considerable advance over the more impressionistic studies that might rely on a smaller sample of prominent, successful, or notorious individuals.

A major finding of this study is that almost 60 percent of the commissioned officers never gained a rank higher than lieutenant. In contrast, chaplains and surgeons were in short supply and found it relatively easy to get work in the Royal Navy. The finding that so many officers' careers ended at the lower ranks has interesting implications, as Wilson points out, for the likelihood that the average naval officer would make a windfall from prize money. While examples of officers buying country estates with their windfall are well known, the benefits from the sale of captured vessels went disproportionately to those at the rank of captain and above. Meanwhile, “Lieutenants wore uniforms and swords, but their frequent bouts of unemployment and low half-pay hampered their chances of being accepted as gentlemen” (192–93).

Wilson shows that the middling sort and the professions, rather than the aristocracy, accounted for the parentage of most naval officers. While patronage was “the lubricant for most men's careers” (137), Wilson takes pains to distinguish between patronage based on carefully assessed merit and patronage based merely on the officer's fortuitous birth to well-connected parents. While the Royal Navy was not a meritocracy in the strictest sense, he concludes, overall the system tended to promote the deserving, particularly those who had proven themselves as leaders in battle. Wilson's account of the struggle to obtain recognition and win a path up this steep slope of promotion is interesting to read in conjunction with the newer scholarship on naval combat in this period; conduct that might appear selfish, bold, or