Boots and the Novel: The Circulating Libraries and their Readers, c. 1900-40

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The Impact of Distribution and Reading Patterns on the Novel in Britain, 1880-1940

• The Archives of British Publishing and Printing, Special Collections, University of Reading

• The ‘big noises’ (Harold Raymond, Chatto and Windus, 1937):

Mudie’s Select Circulating Library (1842-1937)
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Boots’ Booklovers Library (1900-66)
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‘The last word in Library construction’
The ‘typical library subscriber’ and the novel: stratification and censorship

George Moore
Circulating Morals: Literature at Nurse
(1885)
James Hanley: censorship and the library reader

Chatto and Windus to Hanley, 11th July 1934

‘I have no personal feelings whatever on the subject, but I have discussed the problem with the travellers, booksellers and circulating librarians and they are all of one opinion, that the circulating library public as a whole jibs at the word, and that its inclusion would materially decrease your sales, leading if not to an actual banning of the book by Boots etc, at any rate to a ca’canny distribution of it. Incidentally also, it would almost certainly involve the book being banned in the Free State, where otherwise it ought to sell well. [...] [I]t seems to me that this book has got a real chance of [...] materially increasing your sales. But the latter cannot be achieved without some concessions to the timidities and prejudices of the average Boots subscriber’
Hanley as Modernist: confounding audience expectations

James Hanley to C&W, 18th July 1934

‘My opinion is this, and it has not altered since I introduced that character, that his phantasmagorical appearance and vanishing gives that chapter the very queerness I wished to give it. Moreover the very scenes in that chapter in my mind have a sort of spectral atmosphere, and identical one for such a man. At the same time it does not follow that this character should not reveal himself later on in flesh and blood. But if he appears like that in this volume then the queerness I aimed at in that chapter is lost. It is enough that he enter and disappear in that queer way.’