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Intimacy, Friendships and Reading in early twentieth-century New Zealand

Reading connects readers, be it by reading the same text and sharing reflections on it, or through reading aloud to friends and family, or through membership in reading groups. To share one's reading also means, to some extent, to share intimacy, and to allow entry into that most intimate of worlds, the mind. This paper seeks to explore questions of intimacy, affection and trust in relation to reading experiences. The paper is based on the extensive and exceptional correspondence of Fred Barkas, a middle-class New Zealander living in Timaru between 1909 and 1932. He called himself a 'constant reader', reading avidly both in the solitude of his home and in social environments. How did his close inter-personal relationships affect and in turn were affected by the choice of reading material and shared reading experiences?

Reading was a central element in Barkas's daily letters to his daughter Mary and it was an essential part of his paternal relationship. It was also the binding element in many of his friendships, enabling affectionate connections within the local community and across distance. The paper examines a number of intimate reading spaces and instances, in which matters of family relations, trust and friendship will be used as a lens to interpret Barkas's reading. As Barkas's reading culture and the reading culture in Timaru was mobile, adaptable and constantly being articulated, so were the relationships he was involved in. I argue that reading was a key element that facilitated both articulation of those relationships and stability within them. I will show that reading and talking about books and literature was a constant component in close interpersonal connections, while the actual reading material and content of those conversations and shared activities, the perceptions and experiences, and the nature of the relationships, were versatile.

Biographical Note:

Susann Liebich is a PhD student in the History Programme at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Her dissertation examines reading culture in the British Empire, c. 1890 and 1930, by contrasting and comparing case studies of individual readers and reading groups in the dominions of New Zealand, Australia and Canada. She holds a BA (Hons) in History from Victoria University of Wellington, and received her M.A. in Media and Communication Studies, History and Psychology from the University of Leipzig, Germany. She has previously published on bookselling in colonial Wellington, and has presented parts of her dissertation research at international conferences. In support of her doctoral research she has recently been awarded the 2009 McCorison Fellowship for the History and Bibliography of Printing in Canada and the United States. Her research interests include modern intellectual history and book history, particularly in the British Empire and Continental Europe.