



World Library and Information Congress: 71th IFLA General Conference and Council

"Libraries - A voyage of discovery"

August 14th - 18th 2005, Oslo, Norway

Conference Programme:

<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla71/Programme.htm>

June 14, 2005

Code Number: 127-E
Meeting: 102 Library History

Where would libraries be without readers? A methodological approach to historical literacy, based on the situation in Norway in the 18th century

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Abstract:

In the attempt to determine the level of literacy in the past researchers base their discoveries on various sources and we all seem to trust the sources we ourselves use more than any others. Based on my own works as well as the work of other researchers my paper presents a number of different of sources and methodological approaches to the question of reading ability in Norway in the late 1800th century. This multi-faceted approach should increase the credibility of the results, when I claim that approximately 70–80 % of the Norwegian population could read by the end of the century.

It is not unproblematic to state the level and spread of reading ability in the past. However, as book and library historians, we must face this is as a necessary task. How will we otherwise come to an understanding of the role of libraries during different historical periods? So – which are our most credible sources and which will be the most profitable approaches to the problem?

Researchers base their discoveries on various sources when they present the spread of reading ability. The tendency is that each of us has a special trust in exactly that type of sources we make use of in ourselves in our own research, be it the spread of organised schools, signed wills, autobiographies, number of published books etc. The results we obtain seem to differ, sometimes to an astonishing degree.

In my own research on the role of commercial book catalogues in the literary public sphere in 18th century Norway, I have tried another approach. Recognising the variation of points of view between different research environments on the Norwegian population's ability to read unknown texts at that time, and the over-simplified popular myth maintaining that people did not learn to read until the end of the 19th century, I wanted to attack the problem broadly. By including the work of other researchers, I could combine a number of different types of sources and methodological approaches. Where as results from one particular research work, based on one type of sources, might lack weight in the academic discussion, in spite of the solidity of the work, my opinion was that a multi-faceted approach would increase the probability to catch the level of reading ability, as well as increase the credibility of the results in the different research environments.

On this background my paper will examine whether it is reasonable to maintain that most Norwegians could read towards the end of the 18th century.

Books in private homes – books in society

A good starting point in the attempt to state the extent of reading ability might be to look at the number of books in private homes and in society at large. The larger the availability to printed media, the more interesting for people to learn to read. On the contrary, if there were no books in homes of common people, the motivation for reading would be less. In the same way, we could assume that there is a connection between the extent of commercial book offer and the share of readers in the population. Why would anybody print books if there were no buyers or readers?

In private homes

In 1790, the clergyman and poet Claus Frimann expresses worry regarding the farmers' reading. The problem, as Frimann describes it, is that the farmers primarily have access to useless tales and drinking songs, which they read with the utmost pleasure. Their reading ability and access to printed material is, for him, a matter of course¹. Frimann's report is a subjective contemporary description. However, other and more objective sources exist, giving information about the farmers' books.

Records of the estate of a deceased person are such a source showing the extent of books in private homes. In a study of more than 16,000 deceased farmers' estates, more than 14,000 books were proved. The investigation also shows that the number of books in the estates increases considerably around the middle of the 18th century, from 20 books per 100 investigated estates in 1740 to 105 books in 1760². In addition to the hymn book, the Bible and the collection of sermons, the material is dominated by various edificatory books, i.e. books we must assume that the owners have provided to read for personal interest, especially as less than 50 % of the listed books were books NOT used for confirmation preparations. Also secular literature, such as codes of laws, history, geography, arithmetic, medical books and more philosophical works were represented, but this part of the collection totalled less than 10 %.

I have personally studied the estate after farmer Gunder Løvslund, born in 1744. The record includes 162 book titles, many of which in several volumes. Enlightenmen literature predominates. Løvslund was interested in geography, books of travel and history, but also

agriculture and health. The estate even includes one or two comedies as well as a small number of religious books.

In addition to records of deceased's estate, there are some examples of "soul registers" containing information of how many books a person owned. Otherwise, the soul registers were used by the clergy to register reading ability and religious knowledge among the members of the congregation. I will return to this aspect later on. During the years 1756-57, the clergyman Henning Abelseth made an investigation of the number of books in his parish, Haram. Only two of the families did not have any books, and these were both young, newly married couples. Abelseth's numbers are well corresponding to equivalent numbers from Rättvik in Sweden, also from the middle of the 18th century, showing that 97 % of the households had books.

Investigations of the number of books in private homes exist in several countries. They show generally that the number of books increased considerably in the course of the 18th century, in Europe³ as well as in Scandinavia⁴.

Norwegian book production 1750-1815

I have tried to calculate the size of the Norwegian book production in the period concerned. This is not unproblematic. The retrospective registration of titles in the Norwegian national bibliographical data base does still not include this epoch.

The literary centre of the joint kingdom Denmark-Norway was situated in the capital Copenhagen, from where the middle classes to a great extent imported their books. When I nevertheless search for the Norwegian book production, it is because my opinion is that books printed in Norway to a greater extent were available to larger and broader groups of the population, than the imported literature.

Of course, it is impossible to reach an exact number, as copies of all titles published in the period have not survived. There exists an earlier enumeration based on our historical national bibliography, *Bibliotheca Norvegica*, showing that 3,231 books were printed in this country in the period 1643-1813⁵. (In 1643, the first Norwegian printing office was established. 1813 is the last year of the Danish-Norwegian union.) As, working with my thesis, I have found several titles which are not registered in the same national bibliography, I can say with certainty that the number of Norwegian book publications is higher than this.

In my efforts to establish the number of book published in the last half of the 18th century, I have used different calculation methods⁶, one of which is detail analyses by other researchers of such as religious publications in Norway compared to equivalent publications in Denmark during the same period. It turns out that the Norwegian publications represent 15-20 % of the Danish⁷. If I audaciously permit myself to transfer this percentage rate to the remaining topics, I may approach a realistic number for Norwegian book publications during the period 1750-1815.

In fact, the Danish researcher Svend Bruhns alleges that the book production in Denmark was approximately 400 volumes per year before 1770. Afterwards, it increased to approximately 500 during the period until 1784⁸. This should correspond to approximately 22,500 volumes in the period 1750-1799. (Attention must here be called to the fact that Bruhns has counted volumes, not titles.) This would imply that the Norwegian book production in the last half of the 18th century totaled 3,625 volumes, given the above mentioned percentage rate.

This calculation method has several evident weaknesses. In the first place, it is very uncertain whether the distribution in percentage of books produced in Norway and Denmark within the religious field may be applied for all categories. The Danish book market was far more differentiated and specialized. There is a reason to believe that the percentage of Norwegian books were lower within other genres than for religious literature. How much lower is difficult to say, but let me, for the time being, reduce the percentage to the half, i.e. 10 %. Then, the Norwegian book production in this period will correspond to approximately 1,800 volumes. If I advance the calculated production period till 1815, to cover all the investigated period, the total number of editions will total above 2,300. There is more reason to believe that this number is too low than too high.

Yet another approach to knowledge about Norwegian book production may be mentioned. Hans Nielsen Hauge, a well known revivalist preacher, addressed the common people. His publications appeared in almost incomprehensible great numbers, even though the research results differ from 250,000 copies⁹ to 120,000 copies¹⁰. In any case, these are high numbers seen in relation to the census in 1801 showing that the number of inhabitants in Norway was 883,603. We also know that the books were distributed all over the country by the help of travelling booksellers. A nationwide network of believers was established, and they kept contact with each other through correspondence. The importance of the publications for the reading ability in Norway should not be underestimated. People got access to literature of their interest, which stimulated reading and consequently also reading ability. Nevertheless, in my opinion, it is as important to consider the large editions, and the fact that they were read nationwide, as a manifestation of an already existing, widespread reading ability among ordinary people. The very existence of books become a confirmation that also the common people in Norway could read around 1800. They were not only able to read, much may indicate that also the writing ability were more widespread than earlier assumed.

Books on the second-hand market

During the last half of the 18th century, books were frequently sold at auctions. The sources show that more than 150 books auctions were organised in Norway in the period 1750-1815. Corresponding numbers for Denmark are above 500. I have examined the Norwegian book auction catalogues. A total number of 140,000 books were presented for sale on these auctions. Roughly 2/3 of them were octavo or smaller.

Danish and German books dominate, but also books in Latin and French occur frequently. On the other hand, books in English are unusual, in spite of the close connection across the North Sea. Furthermore, Danish books in small format treated topics targeting common people, of which enlightenment literature represents a large proportion.

Literary institutions in Norway

The new literary institutions which were established in Europe, did also exist in Norway towards the end of the 18th century. The two first public libraries were Trondheim University Library (*De Kongelige Norske Videnskabers Selskab, Trondheim*), established 1766, and Oslo City Library (*Deichmanske bibliotek, Oslo*), established 1785, both founded primarily on private book donations. Reading societies for the middle classes existed several places in Norway, but first of all in Bergen. At the very end of the century, two booksellers established a subscription library in Oslo, Christiania at that time. All these institutions addressed first of all the middle classes, a group whose reading ability has not been questioned by researchers.

Therefore, it is more interesting to look at the farmers' access to library services. Local clergymen lent books to interested farmers also in our country. Nevertheless, I want to focus on two other phenomena.

In 1797, the local bailiff Sivert Aarflot established a library for ordinary people at the small community Ørsta in North-West Norway (*Nordvestlandet*). The proportion of enlightenment literature was large in this book collection, but it also offered religious literature. In 1812, this library, where no fees were charged, totalled approximately 550 books.

At about the same time, in the period 1798-1804, the bishop Peder Hansen established, in cooperation with local clergymen, 40 reading societies for farmers in Kristiansand diocese. The bishop prepared lists of books the societies should offer according to his opinion. I was surprised to find that he almost exclusively recommended enlightenment literature within a broad field. The religious element is modest.¹¹

The library of Sivert Aarflot and as well as the reading societies of bishop Hansen are interesting because they address local farmers. To me, these are also an evident proof that these farmers could read. Why else should anybody want to establish this kind of institutions?

Reading training

Previously, Norwegian researchers, often connected to the educational sector, considered the emergence of reading ability mainly as a result of the introduction in 1739/41 of compulsory school attendance in the country. They have pointed out that the quality of the teaching was very mixed. At the same time, we have series of 18th century testimonies telling that children learned to read from their parents, often from their mother. This gives us yet an approach to the development of people's reading ability, not limiting us to the expansion and quality of school teaching.

In 1749, bishop Erik Pontoppidan was very annoyed with the farmers in one of the Norwegian fjords who were not willing to contribute the necessary economical funds for teachers' salary. He notes in his visitation record, a little irritated, that "Some of them also started with their ordinary evasive excuses that they could teach their children themselves, as they had been taught."¹² The farmers' resistance was based on their opinion that the existing system functioned well. To move the reading training from the home to the school was an unnecessary and undesirable reorganisation. For us it is interesting to note that several clergymen, and even some bishops, agreed that the parents taught reading more efficiently than the schools at that time.

I have myself found documentation in two farmer biographies from Kristiansand diocese, confirming that parents acted as reading trainers. John Næsset, born 1746, as well as Gunder Knudsen Løvslund, already mentioned above, told the bishop Peder Hansen that their mothers had taught them to read.¹³ The parents' duty to teach the children to read was old and closely connected to the relation to the church. The children had to pass the necessary training before they could receive the Holy Communion. Also in other countries, the parents, and especially the mothers, played a central role in the reading training, which is testified by investigations in Sweden¹⁴ and England¹⁵.

Several researchers have demonstrated that once reading ability was introduced in the family, measures were taken for its preservation.¹⁶ The commitment of parents was of special

importance because the quality of the schools was very shifting. In Norway, around 1800, there were still complaints against mobile school teachers who could not read.

Reading and writing are two different skills

Researchers have often considered reading training and writing training as two aspects of the same matter. In international research, there is a tradition to use signatures from minutes, legal records, wills or wedding documents as sources to state reading ability, so-called *direct sources*. My opinion is that these should rather be considered as sources to state writing ability.

We know that writing training were made compulsory at a later time than reading training in Norwegian schools. Furthermore, the writing training is a longer and more laborious process. Children with short school attendance did not reach to learn writing. This is documented by Margaret Spufford, who bases her results on testimonies from English farmers and country workers.¹⁷

When the authorities required that children should learn to read, the intention was that they should receive Christianity, as it was presented in Luther's Catechism. There existed no corresponding need nor wish from the authorities that children should learn to write. When ordinary people all the same to some extent learned to write, I will claim that this was primarily based on a practical need, such as the writing of contracts. Of course, people were aware of the usefulness of this knowledge, and once it was introduced in the family, they took care to transmit it from one generation to the next, as they did with the reading ability. Writing ability must have had a high status in the 18th century, considerably higher than reading ability.

I have found an interesting Norwegian testimony about this separation between reading and writing training. It is from the upper class. Conradine Dunker tells that she learned to read from her mother. On the other hand, writing should be taught her by a young man called Kinck. He was almost never at home when she arrived, and the result was that she did not learn to write at all. Nevertheless, later she got a teacher in French who instructed her to write French translations of Danish texts. Besides, her farther asked her to write down daily events, also this in French. This was the only writing training she got. When she, some years later, should try Danish, she got big problems, not least with the Gothic capital initials.¹⁸

The art of printing was the precondition for this "unsimultaneousness" between reading and writing ability with which modern research concludes. The emergence of mass production of texts and pictures, made it meaningful to read without being able to write.

The clergy's reports

Beside the records of deceased's estate, the most comprehensive Norwegian source material to evaluate reading ability in the 18th century are the clergy's reports.

The bishops should supervise the state of knowledge among their parishioners. Before 1739, the task was first of all to control that young people possessed the necessary knowledge of Christianity. After the introduction of obligatory school attendance, the children should also be able to "read in book". Therefore, the bishop made examinations of post-confirmation as well as pre-confirmation young people¹⁹ when he arrived on visitation, and noted the result in his records.

The visitation records

An examination of the visitation records of Akershus diocese, concludes that the large majority was illiterate at the arrival of the school decree in 1739.²⁰

My own examination of visitation records from the years around 1800 gives a far more positive picture of the reading ability in the population than the investigation from the period 60 years before.²¹ My investigation includes Kristiansand diocese, where bishop Peder Hansen undertook 3 journeys in his term of office, 1798-1804.

In the visitation record from 1799, I have found out that he assessed post-confirmation young people as readers in almost 70 % of the parishes. Corresponding number for pre-confirmation young people was somewhat above 50 %. 3 years later, bishop Hansen came back on visitation to the western part of the diocese. He stated with satisfaction that the situation had improved. The share of parishes where post-confirmation young people could read, now represented more than 80 %. For the pre-confirmation group, the number is now more than 60 %.²²

In 1801, the bishop made a visitation to another part of the diocese, Øvre Tellemarken, where he visited 8 parishes²³. The record shows that the percentage of parishes where the bishop assessed young people to be able to read, is almost 90 % for the post-confirmation group, and 50 % for the pre-confirmation group.

Bishop Peder Hansen assessed the level of knowledge and reading ability among young people in the diocese mainly as positive: In 80-90 % of the visited parishes young people after confirmation read well or better. Corresponding number for young people before confirmation is 50-60 %. Methodologically, however, my transmission of the bishop's notes to a real evaluation of reading ability is uncertain. He may also have included an assessment of the youngsters' religious knowledge. However, I am convinced that the assessment did not concern the level of memorising known religious texts. I base this on my knowledge of the bishop's strong involvement in the enlightenment work. From his vocabulary, I will claim that the notes in his visitation records may be accepted as a strong indication that young people in the diocese of Kristiansand could read around 1800. My analysis of Hansen's visitation records more than indicates a dramatic increase of reading ability since 1739.

The soul registers

The soul registers are the other central clerical source in Norwegian historical reading research. The clergyman's use of soul registers may be considered as a direct consequence of pietism and the church's desire to get a survey of religious knowledge and morals among the parishioners. The first soul registers emerged in the diocese of Akershus in the 1730-ies²⁴, and spread further to other dioceses.

Whereas the visitation records describe the bishop's impression of reading ability among young people as a group, the soul registers give information on individual level. This is a strength of soul registers as a source. There exist 3 interesting analyses of reading ability, based on soul registers. All of them describe the situation around the middle of the 18th century, and consequently the time before and after the introduction of the obligatory schools. The 3 analyses all show a high reading ability, 79-90 %, already around the middle of the 18th century. These are high numbers. Do they, all the same, give a credible picture?

Most researchers seem to agree on the value of the soul registers as a source for assessment of the reading ability. Some are sceptical though, because the number is too small, and because

they are prepared by the local clergyman, who may be said to have had personal interests in the matter, as opposed to the bishop, who came for inspection. So, the question is: How representative are the results? Can we, on the base of these investigations, assert that 70-90 % of Norwegians in the country could read around 1750? Or are the investigated parishes educated islands in an ocean of illiteracy? I am inclined to reject such a thought. It may hardly be a sheer coincidence that all the analysed soul registers show that so many could read. Still the results have a pronounced difference from the analysis of the visitation records from the middle of the 18th century. On the other hand, they correspond with my own discoveries, which show that the reading ability was up to 80-90 % around 1800.

Let me take some necessary reservations concerning the clerical sources. The information that up to 90 % could read, must be seen in the light of what was then the criteria to be considered a good reader. Neither do we know to what extent the blind, the weak-sighted, the physically and psychically ill were included in the surveys. As for my own examination of the bishop's visitation records, the sources show that some people did not turn up, either because they were out fishing, or because the weather made it impossible to attend. There might have been substitute motives to keep away from the evaluation of one's reading ability. The number of analysed soul registers and visitation records is also limited.

All the same, a total evaluation of the existing clerical source material strengthens the point of view that, in Norway, large parts of the population in the country could read, in any case towards the end of the century.

Were only men able to read?

If we will investigate how widespread reading ability was in Norway in the 18th century, it is necessary to look at reading ability among women in particular. If I should base my investigation on the more popular assumption that only the man in the family could read at that time, I would already at the start reduce by 50 % the reading ability in the total population.

I have good reasons to assume that even women could read. Already in the 17th century more and more women learned to read printed writing. The Danish historian Charlotte Appel claims that, at the end of the 17th century, there were probably almost as many women able to read as men in the Danish towns, and this might also have been the case in the country. From Norway, I have already presented testimonies about women who taught their own children to read. Were these women sheer exceptions? The above mentioned finds in the soul registers indicate rather the opposite.

Especially the analysis of the soul register from 1760 in Sogndal focuses on differences of reading ability between women and men.²⁵ It shows that the difference is quite insignificant in age groups up to 50 years. In the age group above 70 years, there is, on the contrary, a very pronounced difference between women and men. Almost 90 % of the men in this age group read in book. As for women, the corresponding number is 50 %, with other words, significantly lower. As there were 3 times more women than men who reached such a high age,²⁶ there were nevertheless more women than men who could read in this age group, if we consider the number of persons.

From the investigation of the contemporary soul register from 1756 in Haram, it appears clearly that women above 45 years of age read more badly than men. This gender difference is

not visible in younger age groups, where women, on the contrary, read quite as well as or better than men of their age.²⁷

Both investigations show lower reading ability among women than men born around 1700. For women born later in the century, the reading ability is on the same level as for men. This did not only apply to the upper classes. In the soul register from Sogndal, both of the two oldest women who could read were from cotter families.²⁸

One thing is to learn to read, another matter is to maintain the knowledge. Reading ability which is used seldom or not at all, rapidly diminishes. The gender roles of that time may have caused that primarily men needed reading ability, and consequently practised it. On the other hand, I will claim that even women practices their abilities, such as reading training for their children and grandchildren. The important element of edifying religious texts in the records of deceased farmers' estate²⁹ should, in my opinion, indicate that women read for the salvation of their own soul, and consequently maintained their abilities. The conception of the man as the main person, within the family as well as in society, who took care of reading and written information, should be adjusted.

Norwegian farmers' position in society

In 1801, Norwegian towns were still small. According to this year's census, only Bergen, with 20,000, and Oslo, with 8,000 inhabitants, may be considered towns of a certain size. The remaining towns were significantly smaller. Approximately 90 % of the population lived in the country side.

Norwegian farmers were not gentlemen farmers or officers. Nevertheless, it should be accentuated that their economical situations differed significantly. Approximately 30 % belonged to the poorest of this group, and 10 % belonged to the richest. The remaining part was spread between what may be called the middle classes among farmers and the well off farmers. Norwegian farmers have traditionally, regardless of economical situation, had an independent position. They owned or leased land which they cultivated as their own. In this respect, they were not subjugated to any nobleman. Norwegian farmers were legal persons. They were entitled to make agreements and sign contracts, concerning such as sale of timber or lease of ground from another owner. Therefore, they were traditionally well informed about the law. They used the legal system to take care of their interests. They also served as jurymen and sat in local poor relief boards and school committees.

Neither should we forget the events of the first half of the 19th century, when many farmers represented their regions in the national assembly at Eidsvoll and passed the Norwegian Constitution in 1814. Hardly 20 year later, we got the "farmer parliament", and, a few years after this, the same parliament adopted the act concerning local self-government in district municipalities, "Local government act" of 1837.

Is it possible to imagine that farmers participating so actively in society should not be able to read relevant documents and draft contracts? Is it possible to imagine that the Parliament could adopt a law on transfer of significant power to the municipalities, if local inhabitants were not qualified to assume the responsibility? I will say no.

I will claim that the very social position of farmers in Norway in the 18th century and later on shows that reading training served a purpose for them. For many writing ability would have been useful as well, but I will not get into that in this paper.

Practical obstacles to reading possibilities?

Availability of light

The availability of light sources was a problem when people should read. In his thesis "The Spirit in the Lamp"³⁰, the Swedish anthropologist Jan Garnert has shown that people were bound to the light source to an extent that we hardly can imagine today. This did not only concern the common people, but also the upper class. He illustrates this through contemporary paintings and sketches. The pictures constantly show the same situation: People search towards the light source in the room, and the rest for the room is only darkness and shadows.

Which sources of light existed in the 18th century? Among ordinary people, the common source of light in the house was the fireplace or an open stove door. This was supplemented with pine sticks when they needed better light. The whittled wooden sticks burned only 5-10 minutes. Tallow candles were moulded after the slaughtering in October-November. The production of tallow candles was quite small. A normal annual production at a farm was only 10-12 candles. Therefore, they were saved for important festivals, such as Christmas. But they were also employed when travelling shoemakers came to the farm. They needed good working light. Wax candles, made of beeswax, were a luxury article, and were primarily used for important ceremonies in church or at very special celebrations by the aristocracy.

Fish oil lamps were to a great extent used along the coast. The fish oil came from fish liver or decoction of oily fish. Burning fish oil had an unpleasant smell. Therefore, the fish oil lamp was the lighting for poor people. All the above mentioned light sources had in common that they only produced faint light.

During the summer half-year, it is daylight nearly all the 24 hours in Scandinavia. Then, light was no problem for he/she who would read or perform work demanding good light. However, for most people, the summer daylight implied longer working days. While working hours in wintertime were 6-7, the daily working time in summer could last up to 18 hours. They rose at dawn to profit from the daylight, and worked until late at night.

The moon and the stars were also good light sources, not at least in winter. When the sky was clear and the snow lay white, the evening might be as light as the day. One could read, then, without problem.

So, which conclusions concerning reading possibilities may we draw on the background of limited access to reading light of that period? It seems clear that the upper class had the possibility to profit from daylight as supplementary and perhaps most important light source. For farmers and other workers it may, in the first round, look like the limitation of light gave them little possibility for reading. To a great extent, working tasks prevented them from using daylight for other purposes.

When other sources indicate that reading ability was spread at all levels of the population at the end of the 18th century, we must conclude that they found possibilities for reading all the same. Sunday was, to a great extent, a day off, even though the cattle had to be taken care of. Only imperative work was done. This was a day for reading, if they preferred so. Even though the ordinary working days were long, the working speed was not always high. Periods of waiting and rest have occurred. Some types of work, such as herding, implied long periods of watching the animals.³¹ It is also easy to imagine reading behind the corner in daytime if somebody had picked up a pamphlet with an exciting story or a new song.

Nevertheless, the limitation of light sources must be considered as a problem for 18th century readers, especially for common people. But it was not insoluble. By profiting from existing possibilities, eager readers could acquire knowledge of literature.

Glasses

It was more difficult for elderly people and others with poor sight. In many books, the typeface was dense and the characters small. If there was no access to glasses, light sources were of little help. Glasses had been known from the 13th century on, even though they got their modern design only in the 18th century. In the 17th century, they started to produce glasses industrially, and large quantities of glasses were distributed all over Europe. If a salesman bought 8,000 pairs, he had to pay only 0.05 crowns (5 øre) for each of them, according to the Swedish historian Peter Englund.³² In other words, the price was so low that glasses were also obtainable for ordinary people. However, the quality was variable, the glass was often of bad quality and carelessly cut. The only kind of individual adjustment was according to the age of the user, standardised in groups of 30-40 years, 40-50 years etc. Nevertheless, the accessibility of glasses represented a quite new possibility for people to read and work even if their eye sight was poor. In the last half of the 18th century, glasses was an aid which was accessible to most people who needed it.

Conclusion

I have presented different investigations. Looking at them individually, it is difficult to insist that each of them proves that ordinary people could read at the end of the 18th century. But when I juxtapose the results, I will claim that they show the probability that far the most people could read at this time. A part of approximately 70-80 % does not seem improbable. The very diversity of methods and source material which are used, makes it safer to draw such a conclusion. People could read, not necessarily as quickly as we can today, but they could read and understand printed, unknown text. On the other hand, we still know little about how readers of that time interpreted what they read.

Anyhow, in a library historical perspective we can state that the readers existed before the libraries.

¹ Frimann, Claus (1790), *Almuens Sange* (Songs for the common man). Kiøbenhavn.

² Fet, Jostein (1995), *Lesande bønder. Litterær kultur i norske allmugesamfunn før 1840*. (Reading farmers). Oslo : Universitetsforlaget.

³ Chartier, Roger (1991), *The cultural origin of the French revolution*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

⁴ Jarrick, Arne (1990), Borgare, småfolk och böcker i 1700-talets Stockholm (Burghers, common people and books in 1800th century Stockholm). (*Svensk Historisk tidskrift*, 110, s. 191–228.

⁵ Tank, Roar (1932), De femti år. I: Francis Bull og Roar Tank (red.), *Festskrift til Den norske avdeling ved Universitetsbiblioteket, på femtiårsdagen for Loven om avgivelse av trykksaker. 1882 – tyvende juni – 1932* (Festschrift to the Norwegian department of the Oslo University Library). (Privattrykk i 100 eksempl., nr. 25 utg., 9–32). Oslo: Steenske forlag.

⁶ A more thorough presentation is given in Byberg, Lis, *Brukte bøker til borger og bonde. Salgskatalogenes funksjon i en norsk litterær offentlighet 1750 – 1815*. (Second hand books for burghers and farmers). To be published.

⁷ Fet 1995.

⁸ Bruhns, Svend (1994), *Bibliografiens historie I Danmark, især ca 1700 til 1875*. (The history of bibliography in Denmark). Upublisert afhandling for licentiegraden, Aalborg.

⁹ Kullerud, Dag (1996), *Hans Nielsen Hauge. Mannen som vekket Norge*. Oslo: Forum Aschehoug

- ¹⁰ Furre, Berge (1996), Hans Nielsen Hauge og det nye Noreg. I: Svein Aage Christoffersen (red.), *Hans Nielsen Hauge og det moderne Norge*. Oslo: Norges forskningsråd (KULTs skriftserie nr. 48).
- ¹¹ Byberg, Lis (1998), *Biskopen, bøndene og bøkene. Leseselskapene i Kristiansands stift 1798-1804*. Oslo: Høgskolen i Oslo. Some aspects of these societies are presented in Byberg, Lis (2000), Reading societies for Norwegian peasant farmers around 1800 : Feature of a new social order or an instrument of the authorities?. *Journal of information, communication and library science* (7), no 2, pp 1-15.
- ¹² Jensen, Oddvar Johan (1995), "Lære deres Børn selv, ligesom de vare lærte." Sjeleregistret som kilde til allmuens kunnskapsnivå før opprettelsen av allmueskolen. *Heimen* (2), s. 85–90.
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