

Readers: Vintage People on Photo Postcards

BY TOM PHILLIPS.

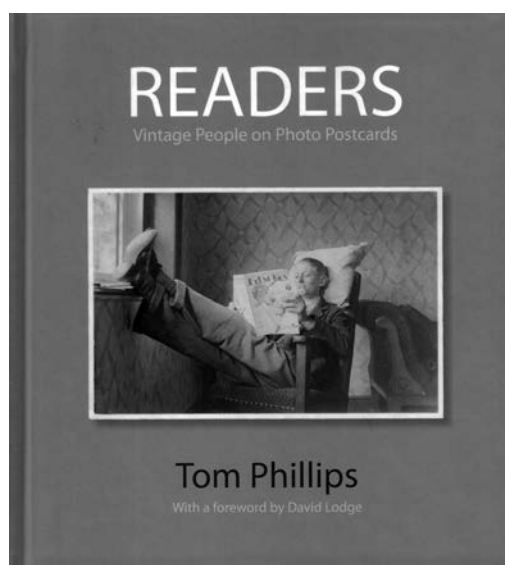
FOREWORD BY DAVID LODGE
(BODLEIAN LIBRARY, 2010, \$25)

BOOKS ON READING attract those of us who relish the experience. That includes illustrated books such as the charming *Readers*, a small-format hardcover from the Bodleian Library (close to 7 inches square; 112 pp.). The shape of this book suits the subject matter perfectly; on each page are reproduced two portrait postcards of British subjects, in either horizontal or vertical format, reproduced in sepia tones at 75 percent of their actual size, with little touchup. The high-quality, glossy reproduction from negatives makes the postcards look very close to original.

All of the photos were taken in the first half of the 20th century, and most of them before the Second World War. As the author and collector, Tom Phillips, points out in endnotes, the “radical democratisation of portraiture” took off after 1902, when the post office permitted messages on the backs of inexpensive photo postcards. Many of these cards, in fact, were sent in envelopes, which contributed to their preservation. (A few of the messages are included in the notes, prompting smiles and speculation.)

The more than 200 postcards in the book were selected from Phillips’ massive collection of 50,000 now housed in the Bodleian Library. Under the general theme of “readers,” images are cleverly grouped—so we have the young and the elderly, male and female, choirboys and clergy (well represented), nurses and military men, and a delightful spread depicting identical twins. Besides studio portraits with diverse backdrops, thanks to the rise of amateur photography, there are also workaday parlour scenes, garden scenes and plenty of beach scenes (hello, Margate!). The curatorial selection and pacing of images works to great effect.

As David Lodge points out in his thoughtful foreword, “Since the experience of reading



itself is visually inscrutable, one looks at these images for other kinds of human interest, behavioural and sociological” (p. 6). And the student of history will find plenty of interest here. For instance, what are these 20th-century readers “reading”? Books and magazines often served as props in the photographer’s studio, but in the less formal portraits by amateurs, the newspaper or even a Sunday school exercise book seems right at home. Phillips points to particular titles of interest in his introduction, the odd caption and non-intrusive notes.

“Reading” these photos provides a pleasant diversion from reading text. From hair, clothing and shoe styles to furnishings to interior décor, their details provide a fascinating glimpse into an earlier era. By extension, one wonders how readers of the 21st century will be depicted—and whether digital devices will be more prevalent as reading material than traditional words in print. Come to think of it, the photos themselves may be digital too.

Readers is one in a series of four books (to date) showcasing postcards from the Tom Phillips Archive. The other titles are *Bicycles*, *Weddings* and *Women & Hats*, all distributed by the University of Chicago Press.

~ REVIEWED BY NAOMI PAULS