

The Unmapped Country Within Us: New Acquisitions in Victorian Print Culture

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This paper is unlike the others you will hear today in one important aspect: it is as much about your research as it is about mine. It has, I think, become all too common for academics and librarians to celebrate uncritically the launch of every new electronic resource that appears in their fields. My intention here is to step back and ask some difficult questions about how the research landscape as a whole is evolving and how that evolution promises—even threatens—to place unique challenges in the way of scholars whose work centers on the Victorian period.

Those familiar with George Eliot's last novel *Daniel Deronda* may recognize the title of this paper as coming from a scene where Eliot offers a gloss on protagonist Gwendolen Harleth's mysterious decision—spurred by feelings lurking somewhere in the “Unmapped Country Within” her—to keep rather than pawn a necklace around which much of the plot (and her doomed love affair with Deronda) turns.

As researchers we often find ourselves moving across that indeterminate threshold between the mapped and the unmapped country that intersects our own analytic fields. But, like Gwendolen's choices, it is often those parts of our own fields which remain unmapped—a neglected collection of letters found in an archive, a long-forgotten book, an obscure periodical—that shape most profoundly our research

agendas. But, of course, to anatomize the scholarly conversation taking place around the objects of our own interest, we must first acquaint ourselves with what is mapped before striking out, however modestly, into regions where scholarly inquiry and analysis have yet to gain a foothold.

In the not so distant past, such a striking out typically meant spending countless hours poring over materials collected into archival boxes, or—more commonly—reading through seemingly endless rolls of microfilm. Although activities of this kind continue to occupy scholars, the advent of so many online resources is quickly changing not only the mechanical processes by which we go about doing research, not only shortening the length of time we might be obliged to spend digging up materials, but also fundamentally altering the kinds of research questions we can ask and expect, in the space of one lifetime, to answer.

Perhaps the most dramatic development in this evolution to date occurred when Proquest introduced **Early English Books Online** several years ago. Collecting together all extant titles listed in Pollard & Redgrave's and Wing's *Short Title Catalogues* (1457-1640, 1641-1700), researchers at a stroke had access on their own desktops to almost every book printed in England (or in English elsewhere) from Caxton to the beginning of the eighteenth century. Picking up where Proquest left off, Gale describes its own database, **Eighteenth Century Collections Online** – comprising “every significant English-language and foreign-language book printed in the United Kingdom along with thousands of important works from the Americas”

–as “the most ambitious single digitization project ever undertaken” (website). I certainly found Eighteenth Century Collections Online especially useful in my own work on British Methodism and Wesley’s position in the field of religious cultural production. Without its full text searching facilities, what took me only several weeks might well have taken months of reviewing microfilm. Between these two products, a relatively bright light now shines across the first three hundred years or so of the human textual endeavour in English. Thus there is relatively little from this period—far less than only a decade ago—that can continue to be described as unmapped country—however much of it may remain unexplored by modern scholars.

But where, for the Victorianists, is Nineteenth Century Collections Online? As most people in this room well know, the nineteenth century witnessed some profound changes in the Atlantic world’s social, legal, and geopolitical composition, as well as advances in printing technology that together precipitated a revolution in the market for books and periodicals. The advent of stereotyping allowed printers to keep popular titles, especially bibles, hymnbooks and reading primers, in print at far less cost than would otherwise have been possible with standing type. Steam printing also changed the speed with which new materials – especially newspapers – could be printed on both sides of the Atlantic. The rise of the Sunday school movement in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries also led to a dramatic rise in literacy rates across Britain and America. And in America in particular, where the Federal Copyright Act of 1790 deprived British authors of

their intellectual property rights, cheap reprints proliferated at a rate that could hardly have been imagined only two generations earlier. The combined result of all these technological and social developments was that far more books and periodicals were produced in the nineteenth century than in all the preceding centuries combined. Though not uncontested, many scholars have also argued that this explosion in print also fundamentally altered the way readers engaged with texts throughout the nineteenth century, instigating what has come to be known as a reading revolution. No longer, these scholars argue, would readers pore over a few texts with great intensity. Instead, they began to read a far larger number of texts more superficially or more extensively. Like all social change, this was greeted with a sense of moral panic on the part of the literary establishment made up of academics and members of the clergy. These anxieties are perhaps best evinced in the proliferation of nineteenth-century advice manuals written by nervous authors and other cultural authorities with an eye to instructing readers of all ages on what books to read and how best to read them.

Faced with the same daunting mountain of material as our nineteenth century forbearers, where are we to look for guidance and advice as scholars on how to organize, analyze, and finally construct a scaffolding of meaning for ourselves much less for our students? The deluge of material published throughout the nineteenth century has prevented both bibliographers and, after them, online vendors, from doing much more than dreaming of an enumerative list—much less a comprehensive online resource—deserving of the title “Nineteenth Century

Collections Online”. Nor is there likely to be such a database in the near future. Instead, smaller collections circumscribed by format, theme, and period have emerged. The result is a haphazard patchwork of tools that dot the research landscape, mapping portions while leaving larger swaths in darkness. The uneven way in which these products have emerged—the lack of coordination among competitive vendors resulting in overlap and omissions, the vagaries of library acquisition budgets, and the uneven quality of scanning, OCR, and editorial practice—all impose strict limits on the usefulness of these products that, if not deliberately acknowledged, have the potential to invite errors in comprehension and contextualization.

Of course, none of this is new. Libraries have always been valued at least in part for what they have excluded from their collections. The danger emerges when one uncritically embraces a new online product without at the same time considering the subtle limitations it may impose on a broader research agenda.

Google Books, though not without commercial ends in mind, has made a great deal of nineteenth-century material (though of very uneven quality) available. But everyone knows that copyrighted materials are offered only within strict limits and that even some nineteenth-century materials (particularly if scanned from the collections of the New York Public Library system for some reason) are often available only in “snippet” form. At the same time, **Archive.org** has done a laudatory job of scanning material, much of it from the nineteenth century, housed in libraries

across the United States in Canada (including York) and making it freely available over the web. But the collection is haphazard, there is a great deal of duplication, and, like Google, the scanning of individual items is highly uneven. The vendors of online content, on the other hand, have done a fairly good job of making the full-text of newspapers and other periodicals available to researchers through searchable databases. **British Periodicals I & II, 19th Century British Library Newspapers, and American Periodicals Series** all open a fairly large window on the British and American newspaper press of the nineteenth century. I found American Periodicals Series especially useful in my own work as I pored over issues of the New York *Christian Advocate* from 1826 until 1850, but even here found some surprising limitations. As I worked my way through the newspaper, a gap of five years lurked quietly in the middle of my period beginning in the 1830s. I wrote to Proquest about it (perhaps they were surprised that someone was combing through the issues of the *Christian Advocate* in such detail?) only to be told that they had been unable to locate those issues on film. I found the issues on film and ordered them through interlibrary loan—amazed that I had been able to do what a company with comparatively inexhaustible resources had been unable to do. The missing online issues, incidentally, are still missing.

A greater potential boon, and also a greater potential danger for Victorianists, however, is posed by a new trend in the emergence of thematic collections of primary source materials that often aim to bring together not only books and periodicals, but archival material and ephemera, into online repositories for

research. The illusion of comprehensiveness can be quite compelling. Among the most prominent among the vendors involved in this work is Adam Matthew Digital.

Adam Matthew Group, the precursor to Adam Matthew Digital, will mark its twentieth anniversary next month, in November 2010. William Pidduck, co-founder of the company, recently remarked that, “I still enjoy visiting universities around the world and meeting scholars in the Arts and Social Sciences to discuss their dream projects. The challenge is to transform these ideas into a digital reality. We can’t pursue them all.” (website). But, at first glance, the number of products Adam Matthew Digital has pursued is quite impressive. Among some of those subscribed to by York University and of potential interest to those in this room are **Victorian Popular Culture** comprising three modules entitled “Spiritualism, Sensation and Magic”, “Circuses, Sideshowes and Freaks”, and “Music Hall, Theatre and Popular Entertainment” (though we only have access to the first of these at present); **Empire Online; Literary Manuscripts; India, Raj and Empire;** and **Everyday Life & Women in America, 1800-1920.**

Although thematic products of this kind are by no means restricted to the Victorian period—Adam Matthew also offers a collection of Medieval Travel Writing, for example—it seems not unreasonable to prognosticate that, because there is just so much published and unpublished material extant to document the nineteenth century, that online products of this kind will continue to populate the research landscape in a way that results in a patchwork of—to return to this paper’s chief

metaphor—discovered country interspersed with expanses of undiscovered country whose contours, extent, and contextual importance threaten to recede into irrelevance.

Why is this so?

First, thematic projects of the kind being undertaken by Adam Matthew Digital perform a powerful canonizing function both by valorizing particular themes and by selecting particular archival collections of documents for inclusion as being, for whatever reason (though I suspect scanning costs and licensing are the two of the chief though unacknowledged factors), the most illustrative, representative, or important.

Second, the editorial process is typically closed and made with market rather than research and pedagogical concerns primarily in mind. On a related note, editorial practices followed in the compilation of these products are often not adequately documented or explained so that lacunae are difficult to detect even for the advanced researcher despite the fact that these products in some way resemble traditional critical editions by including lengthy introductory materials and explanatory annotations.

Third, and this flows in large part from the fact that decisions are driven by the market, materials emanating from smaller geographic contexts are often accorded

at best only partial coverage. Often they are ignored completely. Where are the Adam Matthew Digital resources for studying Canada in the nineteenth century? This country's past—as indeed the past of many former colonies—is falling into relative obscurity next those of Britain and the United States. Proquest publishes British Periodicals I and II, and the American Periodicals Series. But there is no vendor (apart from those receiving government monies) willing to invest the financial capital needed to create similarly impressive resources for Canadian studies. Perhaps these developments might even be said to constitute a new form of digital colonialism.

Fourth, all of these problems promise to be magnified as the relative expense of these products, combined with administrative pressures on libraries to morph into pleasant study spaces rather than physical repositories for printed materials, homogenize research collections across the English-speaking world. Library budgets attenuated by the high cost of subscribing to such resources are often inadequate to support the simultaneous acquisition and maintenance of unique research collections.

Fifth, shortfalls in smaller library acquisition budgets threaten to undermine the research careers of scholars teaching at many smaller institutions that cannot afford the cost of even the large comprehensive products, such as Early English Books Online, to say nothing of the smaller patchwork approach that is coming to dominate online resources for the study of the nineteenth century.

Finally, and this is a caution that admittedly applies to the use of any online product in almost any disciplinary context, we are, it seems to me, undergoing a reading revolution of our own. While eighteenth-century readers may have pored over a small number of texts intensively, and nineteenth-century readers occupied themselves by reading a much larger number of texts more extensively, many researchers today—especially graduate students who are ever pressed for time as they take assistantships to meet financial demands, build a teaching dossier, and stay up at night to finish their dissertations—may find themselves sorely tempted to substitute keyword searching for the comparatively labour intensive work of actually reading through primary (and even secondary) source materials. While keyword searching certainly can be useful for combing through vast amounts of literature, there is and never will be in my view a sound substitute for the hard work of actually reading through stacks of literature in the process of making new intellectual connections between texts.

It has not been (thankfully) the purpose of this paper to propose solutions. Simply to raise some issues—perhaps in the tradition of those nineteenth-century academics and clergymen panicked by the explosion of print in their own day—that I believe pose particular challenges to scholars whose work in one way or another centers on the nineteenth century. For every new resource, for every new mapping, might it not also be the case that stubbornly unmapped regions have the potential to fall into deeper shadow? How much more difficult will it become to encourage students—

and, indeed, ourselves—to journey to those unmapped regions that stubbornly exist beyond the digital threshold. And should those regions become ever less frequented, in what unforeseen ways will the scholarly conversation be impoverished as a result?

As with most things, simply being aware of these limitations may go a long way to assuaging them. Pointing out these limitations to graduate students – and encouraging them to continue to apply for travel grants so that they can interrogate printed materials and archival manuscripts first hand, will remain of critical importance.