

Nineteenth Century Collections Online

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If we survey the historical profession at the moment, there are plenty of academic squabbles going on, but the great debates that once divided historians seem to be in short supply. Time was when contests over the standard of living during the industrial revolution or about post-modernism and its application to the study of history would drive scholars into a frenzy of position taking. At the moment, it feels as if historians have put down their weapons. Why is this?

One possibility is that historians are absorbing the impact of digitisation. Our access to historical sources is being transformed. For some, the requirement of travelling to a distant place and staying in a lonely bed and breakfast in order to consult a rare document is no long *de rigueur*. In his most recent book, James Mussell confidently tells us ‘The future of scholarship is digital’.⁽¹⁾ Renewed engagement with primary sources has perhaps made the age of critical theory redundant. Suddenly, historians are confronted with new archives and dramatic new ways of accessing those archives. Is it that we are all empiricists now? Well, maybe. Already, historians are producing new discussions about engaging with these sources. Does retrieving them digitally not transform them from what they once were? New questions need to be asked about how we access sources and the way we get the sources to speak to each other.

It is in the larger context of the digital revolution that I approach Gale Cengage’s [Nineteenth Century Collections Online \(NCCO\)](#) [2]. I always take pride in reading every page of a work I am reviewing. This time I can cheerfully report that I haven’t. Confronted by what I gather is (currently) ten million pages of text, such a task would be impossible.

The brochure for this collection proclaims: ‘The 19th century changed the world. Gale is revolutionising 19th century research’. Does this collection measure up to this bold statement? Not quite, but it can claim to be an essential resource that should be a feature of most digital libraries in universities. It is the natural sequel to Gale’s [Eighteenth Century Collections Online](#) [3], which has already become a much used research platform. The new collection offers a wide range of primary sources that will be of vital use to historians and students and is likely to establish itself as a key port of call for Victorianists in all disciplines. Indeed, as we will see, some of the new collection is likely to be employed more by scholars of literature and theatre studies.

The NCCO offers documents that have been grouped into four major headings: *Asia and the West: Diplomacy and Cultural Exchange*; *British Politics and Society*; *British Theatre, Music and Literature*; and *European Literature, 1790–1840*

. It is therefore a little *ad hoc*. Whilst it is principally about British history and culture, there is a fair amount of non-British material (apart from *European Literature*, the *Asia and the West* collection includes material from the US State department). The collection includes material from the 18th and the 20th centuries. It is also emphatically about the 19th century rather than the Victorian period; some of the most significant holdings relate to the early part of the century.

Each collection can be purchased separately or together as one package. Complaining that a collection of this magnitude is not fully comprehensive is a bit churlish but it is fair to say that some scholars will find it more useful than others, as this review will show. I will discuss how the collection has been sorted and presented and end with a few observations about where this leaves us.

True to the liquid nature of online material, I should make clear that in any case this review cannot offer a complete overview because the whole collection is not yet available and is being released incrementally. When I looked at it in September 2012, the *Politics and Society* collection was 98 per cent complete, but *British Theatre, Music and Literature* was (I am informed by the publisher) only 25 per cent of the way there. Of course, in the digital age our engagement with the sources can never be complete. Sources that we think we know will be recombined and reconnected in new and different ways. By the time this review appears, the *NCCO* may be slightly different, and, in years to come, it may develop in different ways through the needs and challenges of users (and presumably through the policies of its publisher). This does not, I believe, militate against a proper assessment at this stage.

The first thing that should be said is that Gale has put a lot of effort into preserving the original documents. Digitisation is vital in preservation. This is especially true of newspapers. Many of us, when working at Colindale, have found, when working on hard copies of newspapers, that (no matter how careful we are), we leave a pile of fragments behind on the desk as the papers crumble before our eyes. It is difficult to complain about a project that prevents wear and tear on fragile documents whilst expanding access to them.

James Mussell rightly argues, 'Every digitisation project is also an editorial project and all editorial projects must define in some way what it is they edit ... all editions make some sort of argument about whatever it is they publish'.⁽²⁾ As I explored the *NCCO*, I would have liked more information about the criteria for selection. It is vital for researchers to know why documents are being included and what is not being included. What are the absences or silences? This was not always clear. The areas chosen for the four major topic areas certainly reflect major pockets of research activity as they have been practised. Historians of empire will find it useful (though not historians of foreign policy more generally). Domestic politics and social and cultural issues get good coverage. The concern is that these collections may shape what historians, who do not have access to conventional archives, may feel they can do in future. The truth is that there are many important sources they will need to consult which have not yet been digitised. If this collection expands (I couldn't find anything about its future direction) or if other comparable document collections become available (which they almost certainly will), then this will be less of a problem.

In terms of presentation, the *NCCO* is linked to the Zotero note-taking programme. It is possible to annotate and save annotations. Images can also be blown up and, if necessary, rotated. The images are extremely clear. This is particularly important for handwritten documents. I did, however, find myself reflecting that working through manuscripts in the *NCCO* could be very hard work. The screen froze from time to time and the movement from one screen to another varied in time; it could sometimes be quick but also rather slow.

Every collection is linked to a graphing tool. This permits the user to trace the incidence and frequency of key words along a time line. The user can then move from the graph directly to the sources. This is one of the most useful aspects of the site.

Each section has an attractive point of entry with a brief introduction to the subject (something I suspect specialists will skip) but which sets things out for an undergraduate audience. The list of secondary sources for each of these sections tends to include work which is heavily out of date (for example, E. L. Woodward's *The Age of Reform*

from 1962 is cited but not its equivalent in the modern Oxford history series, Boyd Hilton's *A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People*). This leaves a curious disjunction between the state of the art digital presentation on the one hand and some rather old fashioned scholarship in the editorial sections on the other. There is a need for the NCCO to intersect with 19th-century historiography as it is currently being practised.

I did think that undergraduates and even postgraduates would need a bit more guidance to accessing the material. I could imagine a student being so daunted by the vastness of the material that he or she would not know where to begin. Each specific set of documents has a brief introduction. For example, I opened up *British Foreign Office: Japan Correspondence, 1856–1905* and found the following introduction:

The FO 371 class contains the correspondence, policy papers, memoranda, and minutes of the political departments of the Foreign Office. It is the most important class for the diplomatic historian or global studies researcher and contains examples of documents described above. The files of FO 371 are those of the political and subject departments of the Foreign Office itself, and as such contain the main policy papers of the senior planning officials in London. They often include notes of the opinions of cabinet ministers, cabinet papers, intelligence reports, and correspondence and provide evidence on the interaction between the foreign secretary and his diplomatic advisers. These files are the main source to show how Foreign Office officials in their departments reached policy positions and what actions, if any, resulted from them.

What follows is a collection of 904 sets of documents. Each document accompanied by a full citation.

The project organisers have understandably resisted too much explicit editorialising but I felt some specific bodies of manuscripts needed more of an introduction in order for scholars and students to recognise their use and potential.

Let us look at the different *NCCO* collections in turn. These are so varied and extensive that it would be difficult to itemise everything and what follows is inevitably selective.

British Politics and Society

It should be said that the *NCCO* does not include a major source that all 19th-century historians use at one time or another: parliamentary papers. These have been digitised and are available from ProQuest but therefore cannot be easily cross-referenced with the Cengage collection. The collection does, however, reproduce Cabinet minutes from 1880–1916. High politics is represented through the papers of Charles James Fox and of Sir Robert Peel. These are both substantial figures but it is probably fair to say that political historians will still need to look elsewhere for sources.

The social historian will have richer pickings. This collection demonstrates a real attempt to reflect the topics highlighted by social history as it developed from the 1960s onwards. For that reason, there is a lot here on crime, riot and popular politics. Many of the sources that went into, say, E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) can be found in here. Amongst the invaluable collections, I would particularly point to the digitisation of the Francis Place Papers, which remain a vital source for popular radicalism. Home Office files have been extensively reproduced, particularly those dealing with disorder of any kind. These include HO 64 at the National Archives (the records of the Criminal Department). We can therefore trace how the British state dealt with popular radicalism. At the same time, there is a huge amount about the history of the labour movement. To give some idea of the scope of this, the collection of labour movement ephemera includes 282 monographs (20,673 pages); four groups of manuscripts (57 items; 2,890 pages); 1,345 periodical issues (54,765 articles; 17,348 pages). Manuscripts include the quarterly reports of the General Alliance of Operative House and Ship Painters 1878–81. The periodical collection goes from the *Anarchist Labour Leaf* to the *Yorkshire Factory Times* (though I was unclear in some cases whether the run was complete).

One of the concerns of modern social history has been to allow the working class to speak for itself (although, more recently, historians have raised questions about this whole enterprise, viewing it as flawed in its assumptions). The editors have raided that great bibliography, *The Autobiography of the Working Class*, and included 174 working-class autobiographies.⁽³⁾ We find here the voices of men and women in the 19th century. Many of these works require far greater attention than they have received so far. Now they are likely to get it. There are also pamphlets, song collections and other ephemera.

These fine sources all contain the flavour of the 'history from below' movement (as it developed up to the mid-1980s), with its strong emphasis on the rise of labour. Since then, historians have tried to discuss other aspects of working-class life, reminding us about popular conservatism and popular liberalism. The materials for that kind of study (for example, the records of the Primrose League) are not in the collection (yet?). The *NCCO*, as it currently stands, 'constructs' the working class as oppositional and unruly. We are now aware that there are different histories to be written of working-class life that take deference and patriotism seriously.

There are other aspects of Victorian society covered. Historians of religion will value the Tractarian Pamphlets. The Transactions of the Manchester Statistical Society are an important resource for thinking about the way the 'social' came to be imagined. The same task is performed by the reproduction of Ordnance Surveyors' drawings between 1789 and 1840.

Ever populist, the *NCCO* also includes the letters relating to the Jack the Ripper murders. I would not be surprised if these turn out to be the most used parts of the collection.

Asia and the West: Diplomacy and Cultural Exchange

This collection focuses on the opening up of cultural, economic and political relationships with China and the Far East. It uses diplomatic records from both the Foreign Office and the United States State department. We get despatches from consuls in a variety of Far East postings. Topics include the Opium Wars and the Russo-Japanese war.

Whilst this collection has a great deal to offer the diplomatic historian, it will prove a key resource for missionary studies. It includes missionary correspondence dealing with China, Japan and Korea. We also get missionary periodicals as well as other publications called oddly 'socio-economic journals'. These include *The Chinese and General Missionary Gleaner* (1851–3) as well as German periodicals such as the *Mitteilungen des Berliner Frauen-Vereins fur China* (1888–1900).

British Theatre, Music and Literature: High and Popular Culture

This collection, when complete, will prove to be a great resource for the developing area of popular literature and print culture. It includes the archives of the Royal Literary Fund (founded in 1790), the charity which has been used to assist struggling authors and their families. This is an important source. Many authors, needing financial assistance, applied to the fund. These included famous names but the archive is probably most useful for names who are less well known today but are ripe for re-discovery. It allows us to undertake studies of the literary world, including prosopographical work.

The papers of the stage include the records of Drury Lane under Sheridan 1776–1832. However, the big ticket items are the collections of Barry Ono and Sabine Baring-Gould and Thomas Crampton. Barry Ono (1876–1941) was an English variety performer who had a passion for collecting Victorian penny dreadfuls at a time when these were fairly easy to obtain. He left his collection of roughly 700 titles to the British Library where it has been a resource for anyone interested in popular fiction during the 19th century. If one needed a copy of *Jack Harkaway Among the Malay Pirates*, the British Library was the place to go. Now this kind of material will be available to scholars more generally, and it will not be a surprise if we see a new wave of studies of Victorian popular fiction emerge in its wake. The same is true of the Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould, the folklorist, who collected ballads and broadsides. This is one of the best ballad collections and I have raided it myself in the past. In the same spirit, we have the music dealer Thomas Crampton's collections of songs. These collections include a great deal of the material produced by James Catnach, the leading publisher of broadsides in the 19th century.

European Literature, 1790-1840

This is made up of the library of Victor Amadeus, the Landgrave of Hesse-Rotenberg (1779–1840) which was housed at Castle Corvey, Paderborn, Germany. Not only does it contain 72,000 volumes but it is a major resource for the study of European Romanticism. This collection was unknown to scholars before the late 1970s and promises to make us think in trans-national terms about Romanticism and the literary marketplace.

The coming of the *NCCO* is clearly an important moment in the development of 19th-century studies. But what is the long-term impact of digitisation going to be? It may be that our admiration for research becomes downgraded. Up to now, we have given historians and other scholars credit for the long hours devoted to tracing documents, filleting them and staying in bed and breakfasts in unlikely places as the research in different archives was carried out. Now it is becoming increasingly possible to assemble the sources for an entire monograph in an afternoon (though the reading will take much longer). It may be that we will need to think more deeply about sources, to interrogate them textually and to engage in further discussion of the way we combine historical sources. More profoundly, there may be a much greater emphasis not so much on historical reconstruction but on the arguments we then develop. We move from the age of Olympian research to a new age of searching analysis.

Notes

1. James Mussell, *The Nineteenth-Century Press in the Digital Age* (Basingstoke 2012), p. xii. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *ibid*, p. 4. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated Critical Bibliography*, ed. John Burnett, David Vincent and David Mayall (New York, NY, 1984–9, 3 vols.). [Back to \(3\)](#)

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/44109>

[2] <http://gdc.gale.com/nineteenth-century-collections-online/>

[3] <http://gale.cengage.co.uk/product-highlights/history/eighteenth-century-collections-online.aspx>