# Googling the Victorians

Patrick Leary

On the drawing-room wall of Michael Gorman's childhood home in New Zealand hung an oval portrait of a lady. Growing up, he learned that the lady in the portrait had been the mother of his great-great grandmother Ella Stuart, who had sailed from England to Australia and had died there in 1910. He also learned a bit about the lady's life as a celebrated poet of the 1820s and 30s, and the rumours surrounding her mysterious early death. In 1999 Gorman, then in his fifties, bought a computer and began to explore the internet. There he found that others were interested in the lady in the oval portrait—indeed, that someone was writing her biography. The two, descendant and biographer, were put in touch, whereupon other family members brought forth documents and lore. As a result, much of what literary historians thought they knew about Letitia Elizabeth Landon—the 'L.E.L' in whose life and work scholars have taken such a keen interest in recent years—has been revealed to be utterly mistaken. The traditional puzzle about L.E.L. has always been her death by poisoning at age 37 in 1838, soon after her hasty marriage: was it murder, suicide, or carelessness? Yet the greater puzzle all along may instead turn out to have been her life, and the three illegitimate children fathered by powerful editor and mentor William Jerdan whose existence she and Jerdan had been at pains to conceal from contemporaries and posterity alike. Scholars may well disagree about what difference the existence of that relationship and of those children (one of whom was Ella Stuart) will or should make in interpreting Landon's poetry, or in understanding how she managed her career in the Regency literary marketplace. But the startling fact remains that for 170 years this key biographical information lay entirely out of sight of anyone but the successive generations of the author's descendants ... until one of those descendants happened to type her name into a search engine on the internet, and the scurrilous drawing-room gossip that had so plagued Landon in life, and from which she fled to the coast of Africa and a lonely death, caught up with her at last.<sup>1</sup>

Fortuitous electronic connections, and the information that circulates through them, are emerging as hallmarks of humanities scholarship in the digital age. For many years the *sine qua non* of new scholarly discovery has been a cache of overlooked manuscripts turning up in a box in a country-house attic, the drawer of an old desk, or, in the classic case of the Boswell papers, an ebony cabinet in an Irish castle. The eureka moments in the life of today's questing scholar-adventurer are much more likely to take place in front of a computer screen.<sup>2</sup> That this is so reflects a profound shift in our everyday working relationship to the Victorian past, a relationship now crucially mediated by digital technology. The rapidity of that shift has been alternately exhilarating and bewildering, its long-term permutations and consequences difficult to gauge. Ongoing legal, commercial, and institutional conflicts over which texts and what information will be made accessible by and to whom, and at what cost, await resolutions that in turn depend in part upon developments in information technology, intellectual property, and scholarly publishing. Nevertheless, it is at least possible to pause and reflect upon some of the ways in which the digital revolution of the past dozen years has changed how we do our work from day to day, and to try to take the measure of some of those changes.

One way of approaching this is by a survey of the expanding array of websites and other online resources available to Victorianists, of the kind that the late Chris Willis so ably conducted in these pages in 2002.<sup>3</sup> Another is to trace the history of the use of digital tools in the study of nineteenth-century Britain, drawing continuities between postwar developments in computing and the practices of the personal-computer era.<sup>4</sup> Less formally, this essay instead considers certain aspects of how Victorianists are coming to explore the period, and experience its textual legacy differently, because of such resources. When I published an article in 1995 about the internet and Victorian Studies I felt it necessary to explain what this new 'World Wide Web' was, and to cajole wary colleagues into experimenting with email.<sup>5</sup> Much of what then struck me as remarkable and revolutionary now feels merely routine, and it is of course exactly this quotidian ordinariness that measures the magnitude of the transformation that has taken place. Nowhere is this more vividly reflected than in the ability to search and locate strings of characters in unimaginably

vast stretches of text. Where Lytton Strachey famously imagined dipping a bucket here and there into the vast ocean of information about the Victorians, modern scholars are now trawling that ocean with greater and greater efficiency. Google, which made its debut in 1998 as one of a number of search engines, has quickly outdistanced its competitors to become a generic term for rapid searching of the hundreds of millions of sites already populating the web, a term that has inevitably mutated into a common verb. It is in this broader, non-proprietary sense, encompassing online forays by means of Google and other search engines into publicly accessible texts and sites, as well as into organized online collections of digitized materials both free and fee-based, that I will use the term here. The extraordinary power, speed, and ubiquity of online searching has brought with it a serendipity of unexpected connections to both information and people that is becoming increasingly central to the progress of Victorian research, and to our working lives as students of the nineteenth century.

# 'When found, make a note of'

Poring through books and periodicals in search of particular words and phrases has always been part of a researcher's job. In his recent memoir, *A Little Bit of Luck*, Richard D. Altick writes of having developed the ability to scan thousands of pages of text—thirty years of *Hansard* for one project, 5,000 pages of *Punch* for another—hour after hour, day after day, while thinking of other things.<sup>7</sup> Books like *The Presence of the Present* and his history of the first ten years of *Punch*, which are essentially brilliant exercises in annotation, stand as a testament to the extraordinary results that such a technique, in tandem with a uniquely well-stocked mind, can achieve.<sup>8</sup> Yet just as electronic indices have undermined the importance for lawyers of possessing a vast and precise memory for case law, so also have the new digital tools and sources available to literary and historical scholars rendered this particular set of skills increasingly obsolete. Of course we will always make connections among the many texts that we read, and take and use notes of them, but the deliberate ferreting out of allusions from disparate kinds of texts is rapidly coming to rely almost entirely upon electronic searching.

Let me illustrate this with a typical example from my own work. A few years ago, in the course of research on the *Punch* magazine circle of the 1850s

and 1860s, I came across a 'large cut'—the full-page political cartoon in each week's number—whose full meaning persistently eluded me. (This has not been an uncommon experience.) In this John Tenniel cartoon, which appeared in August of 1858, a sceptical British Lion, in seaside holiday clothes, is approached by Louis Napoleon, who, smiling and bowing, holds out his hat and cries (this is the cartoon's caption), 'Please to remember the grotto!' From reading the Times for that week I understood the political context well enough, which had to do with French naval celebrations held at Cherbourg that had alarmed British public opinion despite Louis Napoleon's attempts to be ingratiating. What continued to puzzle me, however, was the cartoon's structure, and especially its caption. Large cuts at this period almost always yoked commentary on political matters with local, topical allusions, but what this 'grotto' signified I couldn't tell. At last I tried googling the phrase, 'remember the grotto'. After a page or two of irrelevant 'hits', the phrase popped up in a context that began to make its referent clear: a passage from Thomas Holmes's London's Underworld of 1912, in which the author describes the street games of London's poor children. On or about St James's Day in early August, a date that coincided with the beginning of oyster season, children would build little shrines of oyster shells next to the pavement or on street-corners, in which they placed bits of candle or colored glass. Standing next to these, they implored each passerby to 'Remember the grotto' with a gift of coin, a mode of begging like asking for a penny for the guy. Beginning with this crucial clue, the ordinary course of reading and library research ultimately yielded quite a bit of information about this custom, which turns out to have been especially widespread in London in the 1840s and 1850s but persisted in some areas at least as late as the 1930s. More to the point for my project, most of *Punch*'s readers in 1858 would instantly have recognized the phrase 'Please to remember the grotto!' from their own aural experience of the London streets, while in the same moment applying the cartoon's suggested metaphor to the relative positions of France and Britain.

After a number of similar experiences, Google quickly became my first port of call for tracking down unfamiliar allusions met with in my research on Victorian periodicals, in many cases making resort to more specialized databases and

reference books unnecessary. Indeed, since the time of that original search, the cartoon's caption, and various aspects of the story behind it, have turned up in still more online texts where I would never have thought to look for them. What is most striking, and often quite useful, about this sort of fishing expedition is how often the sources in which one finds a 'hit' are utterly unexpected. Another example of this came up only recently, when searching for additional instances, beyond those I had found in print sources, in which the Saturday Review had been referred to by its critics' nickname, the Saturday Reviler. Google instantly located the phrase in the following: a biographical account of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, as a favourite epithet of his associates; the short-lived 1872 periodical, The Ladies; an 1864 book about the contemporary stage magicians the Brothers Davenport; an appendix, by Richard Burton, to his 1885 edition of *Arabian Nights*; and a magazine account of a conversation with Frank Harris about his tenure as editor in the 1890s. Each of these sources is revealing in its own way, and, with the partial exception of Harris, quite unexpected. Such experiences reinforce the conviction that the very randomness with which much online material has been placed there, and the undiscriminating quality of the search procedure itself, gives it an advantage denied to more focused research. It has been often and rather piously proclaimed (by myself, among others) that googling around the internet cannot possibly substitute for good old-fashioned library research, and this is certainly true. But we are perhaps reaching a point in our relationship to the online world at which it is important to recognize that the reverse is equally true. No amount of time spent in the library stacks would have suggested to me that any of those sources would be an especially good place to look for instances of that particular phrase, and if it had, the likelihood of actually discovering the phrase in a printed edition of any of them would have been virtually nil.

Few of the texts one encounters in the course of searches like these have been made available for specifically scholarly purposes or prepared according to rigorous standards of scholarly care. Although carefully edited and encoded electronic versions of nineteenth-century texts, such as those prepared for the *Victorian Women Writers Project* and the *Rossetti Archive*, have quite important uses of their own, a great many legitimate scholarly purposes can nevertheless be served by an array of online texts that are, to one degree or another, corrupt.<sup>10</sup>

Despite enormous recent improvements in the accuracy of optical character recognition (OCR), even the most sophisticated digitisation project leaves the electronic text with a substantial residue of errors whose manual correction imposes enormous additional costs. This is particularly true of any project involving newspapers and periodicals, whose smudged, uneven, and inconsistently formatted columnar text often presents special problems. Luckily, that residue of errors poses few serious obstacles to most ordinary kinds of queries, whether investigating what a reference to 'TipTree Hall' might mean, or looking for instances of the phrase 'the two nations' before and after Sybil's appearance in 1845, or tracking down any one of thousands of similar allusions to people, places, works, or events. Although there has been no coordinated attempt to put the Victorian literary canon online, electronic versions of a substantial number of works by most of the major nineteenth-century authors can already be found on the internet in one form or another, along with many lesser-known nineteenth-century texts. Individual rather than institutional initiatives have been responsible for many of these; Lee Jackson's growing online collection of often hard-to-find Victorian commentaries about life in London, for example, amply demonstrates what such a project can accomplish and how useful such plain-text versions can be for many research purposes.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, sites like the Library of Congress's *Nineteenth Century in Print* project in the U.S. and the *Internet Library of Early Journals* in Britain, have kept costs manageable by featuring huge stretches of uncorrected text, drawn from a range of nineteenth-century periodicals, that are linked to photographic images of the actual pages on which the text appeared.<sup>12</sup> Having found an instance of the word or phrase, or some part of it, one can then read the page itself for context before browsing through the surrounding pages. This basic model for interacting with a text is simple enough, and so long as the number of online Victorian texts has been various but limited, most scholars have found this sort of searching and reading an occasional convenience, but hardly a fundamental challenge to their way of working with the period's primary sources. What will make that difference is not simply the ubiquity of the internet, or our students' (and our own) ingrained reliance upon it, but the sheer scale of what is coming online.

## The diffusion of useful knowledge

After a lull following the collapse of the dot-com bubble in 2000, the universe of searchable nineteenth-century electronic print sources has begun to expand at a rapidly accelerating pace, thanks to a range of ambitious commercial and non-profit digitisation initiatives. In December of 2004, Google announced plans to digitise fifteen million books in the collections of university libraries at Harvard, Stanford, Michigan, and Oxford, and the New York Public Library. 13 At the time of writing, details remain sketchy about how this will be done, which books will be selected, and what restrictions will be placed on access to their electronic versions, but it is clear that this project will mean a vast addition to the number of texts that scholars will ultimately be able to search. A similarly collaborative but resolutely open-access project was announced at almost the same moment by Brewster Kahle's non-profit Internet Archive, which has forged agreements with ten libraries in five countries to digitise one million titles. 14 These and a host of more modest projects will inevitably encompass millions of out-of-copyright books, many of them from the nineteenth century, which will join those that have already been made electronically accessible.

At least as consequential will be the migration of nineteenth-century Britain's periodical press to electronic media. For many years, the exploration of these uniquely revealing sources has been hampered not only by lack of access to complete runs of various newspapers and magazines but also by the sheer drudgery of making one's way through acres of closely printed, unindexed text, a task often made even more wearisome by the discomfort of working with microfilm. The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) has recently made public a plan to work with the British Library to digitise one million pages of text and images from out-of-copyright nineteenth-century newspapers, making these widely accessible for the first time.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Thomson Gale UK has announced an ambitious effort, scheduled to start early in 2006, to republish in digital format several hundred periodicals that appeared between 1795 and 1914, selected by a committee of experts headed by Joanne Shattock. 16 In 2004 the Arts and Humanities Research Board awarded a substantial grant to the Nineteenth-century Serials Edition Project; under the supervision of Laurel Brake, Mark Turner, and Isobel Armstrong, the project will create digitised,

annotated editions of six nineteenth-century journals: *Monthly Repository*, *Northern Star, Englishwoman's Review, Leader, Tomahawk*, and *Publishers' Circular*.<sup>17</sup> As with the simultaneous launch of the book digitisation programmes mentioned above, these announcements reflect an increasingly familiar pattern whereby non-profit, publicly funded, open-access projects proceed in parallel with commercial, subscription-based initiatives. In each case there are clearly trade-offs, such as that between cost of access and breadth of coverage. Yet it is not too much to hope that both kinds of projects will in time utterly transform our understanding of Victorian print culture.

All of these developments, and many others now under way or soon to appear, suggest that we are witnessing an explosive expansion in the reproduction and distribution of the public domain sector of our textual heritage, one that has particular relevance to the study of the long nineteenth century. William St Clair has recently illuminated the ways in which the 'copyright window' that opened between 1774, when perpetual copyright was struck down, and the reinstitution of monopoly control over new works that culminated in the Copyright Act of 1842, led to just such an unprecedented frenzy of reprinting, as hundreds of thousands of titles entered the public domain. 18 Accelerated in the Victorian period by the development of stereotype technology, this proliferation of cheap reprints had enormous consequences for canon formation and reading patterns.<sup>19</sup> If present trends in the direction of perpetual copyright continue, the non-canonical print-culture legacy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries will soon have become more widely accessible to more people than that of the twentieth and twenty-first, much of which will have been fenced off by its owners and made accessible only by payment of a fee, with strict prohibitions against sharing copies. Despite similar limitations imposed by commercial projects that aggregate public domain material for subscription-based access, the growth in all kinds of online publishing of out-of-copyright material is steadily making the nineteenth-century past more readily knowable and open to scrutiny than ever before. As Richard Fulton has observed, the students in his Victorian survey class already have more information about the Victorians at their fingertips, and greater opportunities to immerse themselves in the period, than were available to him until after he had been engaged in research for some twenty years.<sup>20</sup>

Google and other search engines are not, therefore, merely the future of scholarly discovery: they are its present. Nowhere is this more evident than in the unglamorous but essential work of annotation. Research for the Strouse Edition of Carlyle's Writings, to take but one example, has been completely transformed in the past ten years by the use of a range of electronic resources.<sup>21</sup> According to Chris R. Vanden Bossche, the project's editor-in-chief, as many as half of the allusions in Carlyle's essays have yielded to web searches, while much of the remainder turn up in resources like Literature Online (LION) and the online edition of the OED. Before these were available, the constant resort to unattributed quotation that characterises so much nineteenth-century prose required that annotators spend many often fruitless hours in the library stacks; today, Vanden Bossche and his team have found that the best place to start with these is to google them, allowing the library spadework to be allocated to the most difficult puzzles alone. Similarly, searches of uncorrected electronic versions of all of Carlyle's works enable the editors to spot cross-references and self-quotations instantly, saving enormous amounts of editorial time and enriching our understanding of these interconnections.

Alongside such formal, collaborative projects, the cumulative daily discoveries of hundreds of individual historians and literary scholars as they explore the exploding number and variety of online nineteenth-century texts are invisibly yet steadily widening our knowledge of the Victorian world. As we share that knowledge with one another, we are quickly approaching a time when the first question occasioned by an intriguing title noticed in a colleague's bibliography or footnote will be, 'Is it online?' And as more and more scholarship moves online, as well, that question will often be answered instantly by a mouse click in the citation itself. One need not posit the imminent disappearance of the codex or of the library to see that electronically accessible and searchable texts serve a variety of purposes for which even the best printed editions are ill-suited, or that a great many nineteenth-century works that would never have been worth a modern publisher's while to reprint will by this means reach new audiences of specialists and non-specialists alike. For many among the next generation of readers, those e-texts will be their first exposure to Victorian culture, and the main conduit by which they subsequently come to know that culture.

### The Way We Read Now

In ways large and small the routine practice of Victorian research reflects the new centrality of the online fishing expedition, one entailed by a shift away from inert material texts to searchable and often interconnected digital ones. What we are seeing is arguably not merely an electronic supplement to traditional library and archival research, but a more fundamental shift in our relationship to the textual universe on which our research depends. One aspect of that shift can be found in the fragmented nature of our online reading, a kind of pragmatic selectivity that follows on from established trends. Notoriously, the scholarly monograph attracts few readers even among specialists, and even those busy readers, unless called upon to review the book, tend not to read it from beginning to end but to skim, check the scholarly apparatus, and mine the text for interesting and useful data and argument. The inherent disaggregation of texts approached via electronic searching, in which each 'hit' is returned embedded in an arbitrary unit of surrounding text, reinforces this cherrypicking approach to reading. In some ways the ideal subjects for electronic searching are texts that were assemblages of short, relatively self-contained units to begin with, such as newspapers and some periodicals. Yet even in those cases, approaching the text through a search engine distorts the original context in ways that can, in turn, distort the meaning of those search results. The sheer number of texts that can be searched also raises new issues about the adequacy of scholarly citation, particularly given the ease with which citations can be downloaded and manipulated with bibliographic software. Electronic searching may require that we arrive at a consensus about what it means to have 'consulted' a source, and that we develop new conventions for indicating more precisely what that consultation has involved and how our colleagues can replicate it.

Although the skill that Richard Altick mentioned, that of visually scanning through columns of text, is no longer so useful as it once was, adapting to these new ways of exploring texts requires its own set of skills. Search engines present, after all, a quite peculiar way of interacting with groups of texts; literal-minded, they bear out the old warning about being careful what you wish for. As anyone knows who has spent much time at it, this means striking a careful balance between precision and inclusiveness. Had my Google search for the

caption of the 1858 *Punch* cartoon's used simply the word 'grotto', for example, I would have been swamped with many thousands of irrelevant hits and never found the answer; on the other hand, the entire caption, 'please to remember the grotto', might well have been too narrow, and turned up nothing at all. Learning to refine searches using Boolean logic and other techniques is an art in which all online researchers are obliged to acquire some proficiency. More structured searching of specialized databases of nineteenth-century material can be considerably more complicated, and for these, as for so much else, the advice of librarians and information scientists remains indispensable to devising the most appropriate and successful search strategies.

For the most productive online exploration of nineteenth-century texts, however, there can be no substitute for a close prior acquaintance with nineteenth-century prose, one that includes at least a passing acquaintance with the languages of Victorian law, medicine, the arts, politics, and journalism. The great versatility of googling—the straightforward precision with which it can locate character strings—is also, of course, its greatest drawback. Concepts and categories impinge on the process only in the most indirect way: one can search digitized Victorian periodicals for 'John Stuart Mill' but not for critiques of Utilitarianism; for 'New Woman' but not for the influence of the New Woman novel. Search strategies that are sensitive to the nuances of Victorian language can go at least some way toward identifying the texts, and the parts of texts, most relevant to a given project. The more mundane task of tracking certain categories of events and people through something like the *Times* requires similar preparation; scholars already familiar with the notorious idiosyncrasies of Palmer's Index, for example, will find that familiarity useful in the electronic version, whilst the Times Digital Archive's Google-like interface demands a different strategy that nevertheless benefits from acquaintance with the Thunderer's own conventions. Very different from the kinds of extensive searching with which this essay has been most concerned, in which hundreds or even thousands of texts may be selectively sampled, is the approach to a specific set of carefully encoded literary hypertexts that invites intensive reader interaction. Jerome McGann's Rossetti Archive is a fine example of what such an ongoing project can accomplish, and McGann has for many years argued

eloquently for the development of other online texts embedded in a digital environment that encourages collaborative exploration and interpretation.<sup>22</sup>

It takes little imagination to foresee that, within a very few years, sifting through 'hits' from search engines will take up an increasingly large proportion of the historical researcher's time, or that the structure of many research projects will change to make use of the expanded range of resources available. Before long, funding agencies will routinely receive grant applications for the hiring of research assistants whose job will consist solely of running long lists of proper names, titles, and keywords through a multitude of texts and databases, culling the obviously irrelevant hits, and then sorting and cross-indexing the residuum anew for that specific project. The wider consequences of such projects, and particularly those that stem from vastly wider access to a large number of previously neglected texts, are considerably less clear. Despite the growth of cultural studies and the move away from traditional notions of canonicity, for example, literary scholars have continued to concentrate their attentions on a relatively limited number of texts, inevitably taking into account only a small sample of the range of material that was actually available to Victorian readers. Studies that cast a much wider net to explore and compare digital reproductions of thousands of nineteenth-century texts of many kinds can be expected to lend new urgency to arguments about what constitutes evidence of literary or intellectual influence.

### The offline penumbra

Optimism about these expanding resources and ways of reading must, of course, be tempered by a recognition of how much remains to be done and how easy it is to over-estimate the pace and thoroughness of progress toward the dream of the universal digital library. One result of the growing ubiquity of the online world that is already widely evident, particularly among our students, is a blindness to the limitations of the internet generally, an often disheartening credulity about the information to be found there, and a reluctance to do the serious work among print and manuscript sources in libraries and archives that remains essential to scholarship. Yet this same occlusion of vision threatens all of us who find ourselves drawn online by the expanded range and sophistication

of resources and the comparative ease of gaining access to them. The time is near upon us when whatever is *not* online will simply cease to exist as far as anyone but specialists is concerned, a condition I have come to think of as the offline penumbra.

The offline penumbra is that increasingly remote and unvisited shadowland into which even quite important texts fall if they cannot yet be explored, or perhaps even identified, by any electronic means. At present this includes, for primary sources alone, every major Victorian newspaper except the Scotsman and the *Times*, all but limited runs of a handful of even the major periodicals, and the vast majority of Victorian novels, sermons, Blue Books, and tracts, among a great many other things. Some of the projects I have mentioned bid fair to change this situation radically over the next ten to fifteen years, but although those projects hold out remarkable promise, their very success will tend to draw the next generation of scholars away from less readily accessible material. Inevitably, more and more scholarly work will be done on texts that can be found online, whilst more inconvenient, costly, and laborious kinds of research, particularly with unpublished manuscripts, is likely to be correspondingly avoided. At a time when even accomplished researchers rely heavily upon online searching, and when many students and interested members of the public rely on little or nothing else, the offline penumbra represents one side of a 'digital divide' that I suspect will subtly affect the ways in which we think, teach, and write about the nineteenth century for years to come.

#### Connection and collaboration

As the astonishing case of Letitia Landon demonstrates, the vast reach of online searching is connecting people, not merely with information, but with one another, often in the most unexpected and fruitful ways. The growing community of family historians has proved to be the driving force behind the development of such key online resources for nineteenth-century research as the 1901 Census, whose implosion on opening day revealed just how widely and eagerly its debut had been anticipated.<sup>23</sup> Biographers of Victorian men and women have not been slow to take advantage of those resources, and some have come to meet and share information with family historians. Kathryn Hughes, working on a biography

of Mrs Beeton, met her subject's great-great niece through online genealogical forums, and before long the two were exchanging photographs, wills, and other Beeton material by email. <sup>24</sup> Eileen Curran, whose ongoing *Curran Index* makes available online all post-publication revisions to the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals*, has had similar experiences. As an offshoot of the *Curran Index* project, she also put online her working notes on particularly obscure contributors to nineteenth-century periodicals, about many of whom she has been collecting scraps of information for over fifty years. <sup>25</sup> Almost immediately after the first of these appeared, she began to receive email from those contributors' descendants all over the world, all of them happy to share family information and documents that often significantly corrected and expanded the life-stories that Curran had constructed. Social, political, and family history are brought together on Mark Crail's 'Chartist Ancestors' website, an impressive synthesis that has also benefited from the contributions of visiting family historians. <sup>26</sup>

But the most active site of interaction between Victorian descendants and Victorianist scholars will surely be the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, which was published in September 2004 to widespread acclaim. The online version of the ODNB offers new or revised biographical entries for more than 20,500 men and women 'active' during Victoria's reign.<sup>27</sup> All of the entries are searchable, with fields that enable one to refine the search by date, age, occupation, religion, and so on, beckoning students to attempt various kinds of prosopographical inquiries unimaginable before; the ODNB will launch thousands of term papers, theses, and research projects. (The entertainment value of such searching is not inconsiderable, as well; one learns, for instance, that in our period the dictionary identifies three thieves, three mistresses, eight adventurers, ten murderers, and three men whose primary occupation is designated only as 'rogue'.) The sheer breadth of Victorian expertise on display is breathtaking; no single project has ever involved the collective work of so many specialists in nineteenth-century British culture, or is likely to ever again. Inevitably, other Victorianists, some of them in possession of records not available to the authors, have begun to discover mistakes and omissions, and to notify the editors about these. The *ODNB* has explicitly welcomed corrections and expansions, as well as suggestions for new biographies, setting up a process

by which these can be evaluated.<sup>28</sup> As family historians discover modes of access to the *ODNB*, most likely through library subscriptions, and become more aware of its riches, that community will fully enter this online conversation, as well. Over time we can expect to see the online *ODNB*, already the most extensive work of collaborative humanities scholarship ever published, become an even more widely collaborative ongoing biographical database, a text continually revised and co-written among descendants from all over the world and scholars from many fields.

At no time since Victorian Studies emerged as a field has so much of the period's life and literature been open to exploration by so many. We are now on the brink of a further, exponential expansion of those opportunities as vast new quantities of hitherto inaccessible records and texts become available for digital searching. At the same time, scholars are routinely sharing information and ideas directly with one another, and with the public, in ways that would have been unimaginable only a short time ago. By enabling these kinds of connections across national, institutional, and disciplinary boundaries, the online world has created spaces in which the renewed 'sense of common purpose' that Martin Hewitt has urged upon Victorian Studies can and does flourish.<sup>29</sup>

#### **Endnotes**

I am most grateful to my colleagues on VICTORIA, the online discussion community for Victorian Studies, for their characteristic generosity in sharing with me their thoughts about the roles that electronic resources have come to play in their own lives as teachers and researchers. I would also like to pay tribute to Chris Willis, whose untimely death has left such a chasm among her Victorianist colleagues, for so often over the years sharing with me her passionate commitment to the democratising promise of the internet for humanities scholarship. No one will ever google the Victorians with more enthusiasm than Chris did.

- <sup>1</sup> Cynthia Lawford, 'Diary', *London Review of Books*, 21 September 2000, 36-37; see also Lawford, "Thou shalt bid thy fair hands rove": L. E. L.'s Wooing of Sex, Pain, Death and the Editor', *Romanticism on the Net*, 29-30, February-May 2003, URL: http://www.erudit.org/revue/ron/2003/v/n29/007718ar.html
- <sup>2</sup> The phrase 'scholar adventurers' was invented by Richard D. Altick for the title of his popular book, *The Scholar Adventurers* (New York: Macmillan, 1950).
- <sup>3</sup> Chris Willis, 'Out Flew the Web and Floated Wide: An Overview of the Uses of the Internet for Victorian Research', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 7:2 (2002): 297-310.
- <sup>4</sup> Patrick Leary, 'Victorian Studies in the Digital Age', *The Victorians Since 1901: Histories, Representations and Revisions*, eds. Miles Taylor and Michael Wolff (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 201-214.
- Patrick Leary, 'Babbage's Children: Victorian Studies Resources on the Internet', Victorians Institute Journal 23 (1995): II-26.
- 6 It would be more accurate to say that Google and other search engines directly search, not the text itself, but the indices that they have previously generated from the text. Here and elsewhere I follow the less precise custom of referring to this process as searching of text.
- Richard D. Altick, *A Little Bit of Luck: The Making of an Adventurous Scholar* (www.xlibris.com: Xlibris, 2002), 198.
- <sup>8</sup> Richard D. Altick, *The Presence of the Present: Topics of the Day in the Victorian Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991) and *Punch: The Lively Youth of a British Institution* 1841-1851 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997).
- Thomas Holmes, London's Underworld (London: J. M. Dent, 1912), 176-180. Available online through Project Gutenburg at http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/1420
- Victorian Women Writers Project: http://www.indiana.edu/~letrs/vwwp/; Rossetti Archive: http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/rossetti/index.html
- 11 Dictionary of Victorian London, http://www.victorianlondon.org/
- 12 The Nineteenth Century in Print, http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpcoop/moahtml/ snchome.html; Internet Library of Early Journals, http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/ilej/
- <sup>13</sup> Google press release, December 14, 2004, http://www.google.com/press/pressrel/print\_library.html. See also the discussion and links in Peter Suber's *SPARC Open Access Newsletter*, 81 (2 January 2005) at http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/newsletter/01-02-05.htm#google. SPARC is the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition.

- <sup>14</sup> Internet Archive press release, 14 December 2004, http://www.archive.org/iathreads/post-view.php?id=25361
- 15 Press release, 9 June 2004: 'Old News is Good News as Newspaper Archive is Planned for the Web', at http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=press\_release\_newspaper. Among newspapers, the nineteenth-century files of only the *Times* and the *Scotsman* are currently available for digital searching.
- Announcement on VICTORIA, 10 January 2005, by Caroline Kimbell of Thomson Gale UK, accessible at https://listserv.indiana.edu/archives/victoria.html
- <sup>17</sup> AHRB announcement, http://www.ahrb.ac.uk/awards/award\_detail.asp?id=324061
- <sup>18</sup> William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 120-121 and *passim*.
- 19 St Clair, Reading Nation, 414-419.
- <sup>20</sup> Personal communication, 7 April 2004.
- <sup>21</sup> Personal communication, 6 April 2004. The Norman and Charlotte Strouse Edition of the Writings of Thomas Carlyle is published by the University of California Press, which has thus far issued *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1993), *Sartor Resartus* (2000), and *Historical Essays* (2003).
- <sup>22</sup> Jerome McGann, Radiant Textuality: Literary Studies After the World Wide Web (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001). McGann and others have established NINES (Networked Interface for Nineteenth-Century Electronic Scholarship) to encourage the creation of peer-reviewed projects in a digital environment; see http://nines.org/.
- <sup>23</sup>O. Gibson, 'Demand jams 1901 census site', *Guardian*, 2 January 2002.
- <sup>24</sup> Kathryn Hughes, 'Ancestor worship', *Prospect*, May 2002.
- <sup>25</sup> Eileen Curran, 'Curran Index: Additions to and Corrections of the Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals,' http://victorianresearch.org/curranindex.html; Curran, 'Biographies of Some Obscure Contributors to 19<sup>th</sup>-century Periodicals', http://victorianresearch.org/Obscure\_contributors.html
- <sup>26</sup> 'Chartist Ancestors', http://www.chartists.net/
- <sup>27</sup> Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), online version at http://www.oup.com/oxforddnb/info/online/. The figure for 'alive' (versus 'active) during the reign is just under 24,000, while entries for all subjects alive during the nineteenth century make up well over half of the total number of ODNB entries, or over 28,500.
- <sup>28</sup> Robert Faber letter to contributors, 12 November 2004, accompanying *ODNB Newsletter* 10 (November 2004).
- <sup>29</sup> Martin Hewitt, 'Victorian Studies: Problems and Prospects?', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 6:1 (Spring 2001), 155.