

Remembering Eileen Curran

Eileen M. Curran, Emerita Professor of English at Colby College, tireless and resourceful investigator of the Victorian periodical press and longtime contributor to *Victorian Periodicals Review*, died in Scarborough, Maine, on April 22 at the age of 85.

A few years ago, doing some research into the history of that monumental achievement, the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals*, I stumbled upon a December 1958 letter from the *Index's* guiding genius, Walter Houghton, to fellow Victorianist Richard Altick. Houghton had written excitedly of a newly discovered ally for his fledgling project:

I've found a demon at Colby who eats, sleeps, talks, dreams nothing but contributors to Victorian journals, and already, aged 30, has a tremendous knowledge of British archives. Name: Eileen Curran.

Eileen was touched when I showed her this passage. She vividly remembered Houghton's offer, a few weeks after he had written this letter, of an editorial position with the new project. She also remembered her own sense of discovery: Curran, it turns out, had been as glad to find Houghton as Houghton had been to find Curran. Recently hired by Colby College in Maine, she was on the lookout for someone who shared the passionate interest in Victorian periodicals that she had cultivated under the guidance of Francis Mineka, who had supervised her dissertation (on the *Foreign Quarterly Review*) at Cornell. Mineka, in turn, had been one of that remarkable group of graduate students working with Emery Neff at Columbia (including Miriam Thrall, Leslie Marchand, and Merle Bevington) whose dissertations in the 1930s and 1940s had pioneered scholarly research into 19th-century periodicals. Eileen had spent the summer of 1958 doing research in London, Edinburgh, and Cambridge, in the process adding substantially to the "tremendous knowledge of British archives" that Houghton would so admire. By the time of his invitation she had already compiled a number of discoveries that would ultimately find their way into the new project's files.

The *Wellesley Index*, and associated projects, would become the work of Eileen Curran's life. The ferocious dedication that Houghton had so astutely detected in the young assistant professor marked her entire career. For over fifty years, despite a bad knee (the result of an accident as a teenager) and many competing responsibilities and distractions, she relentlessly pursued contributors to the Victorian press, many of them maddeningly elusive, through archive after archive, in Britain, America, and around the world. Sending materials back to Walter and Esther Houghton at the *Index* offices, and answering query after nervous query from Walter, she worked tirelessly through summer research trips, sabbatical expeditions, and many long nights to help strip away the veil of anonymity that had for so long hidden the authorship of much of what had been published in the most influential organs of opinion of 19th-century Britain.

Eileen was always proud of the fact that she had never sought or accepted any payment for any of her work on the *Wellesley Index*, finding all of the funding elsewhere for her many research trips and expenses. She was the Houghtons' colleague, not an employee, and that sturdy independence marked their long collaboration and friendship. She and Walter routinely battled one another in long, fierce arguments over how to interpret minute evidential details, arguments whose echoes could sometimes be heard in her conversation and writings long after his death in 1983, as she recalled "what Walter always contended" or "where I disagreed with Walter" about this or that. Unlike some other editors, Eileen did not work on just one periodical, but ranged widely over many, collecting evidence wherever she found it. Her numerous archival discoveries included the astonishing riches of the Royal Literary Fund archive, which she had been the first Victorianist to explore, sending her notes to Walter in 1972.

Rosemary VanArsdel, another pioneer of periodical research and a *Wellesley Index* veteran, has written to me of her hope that "everyone can begin to understand that Eileen should be ranked alongside Walter Houghton as the originator and preserver of periodicals scholarship. I may be one of the few still left who knew and loved them both, for their eccentricities as well as for their genius. In the end, each recognized the brilliance and the dedication of the other and the tremendous importance of the work they both were doing."

Long after retiring from her distinguished teaching career at Colby in 1992, and even into her 80s, she was still dauntlessly working night after night to pore over reels of microfilm at her desk in Waterville, Maine, puzzling her way through endless files of handwritten documents in the RLF archive and the Bentley archive in search of one more clue to an article's author or one more revealing fact about a writer's career. The notes from this dogged research made their way into the additions and corrections to the *Index* (she always called them the "Adds./Corrs.") that she first began publishing in the *Victorian Periodicals Review* in the 1990s. These years were discouraging ones, however, and she often wondered how many people still cared about her kind of research. Long retired, and with no monograph to her credit, she was largely unknown beyond a very small circle of older specialists.

Eileen's venture online to the VICTORIA discussion group in 2000 at last began to dissipate that sense of isolation, as she entered into correspondence with other scholars, young and old, whose interests intersected with her own. Bolstered by this experience, she almost single-handedly carried the *Wellesley* project into the 21st century, consolidating her discoveries, along with some sent to her by other scholars, into what became the "Curran Index," a richly detailed work of reference in its own right that made its debut online in the fall of 2003 and can be found (and will remain) online at <http://www.victorianresearch.org/curranindex.html> as well as through ProQuest's subscription version of the *Wellesley Index*. As long as she was able, she worked happily to provide regular updates to the information there, which has already proven to be of enduring value to scholars. I have often thought that the Curran Index represents a perfect distillation of Eileen's characteristic habits of mind as a scholar: indomitable investigative

energy, delight in precision, scrupulosity about evidence, wariness of conjecture.

Those same voluminous notes also became the basis for an ongoing effort to rescue from utter neglect various writers whose fame was too slight to attract the notice of the Dictionary of National Biography. She called these writers her "Obscures," and often chuckled sympathetically over the vagaries of the difficult and sometimes wayward lives whose details she had so painstakingly reconstructed. These first appeared online in 2002 as "Biographies of Some Obscure Contributors to 19th-century Periodicals" at http://www.victorianresearch.org/Obscure_contributors.html One of the great joys of Eileen's later years was hearing by email from descendants of these writers who had Googled their way to this page and then contacted her; often they had new information and sometimes even family papers to share, which delighted her. One such correspondent became a good friend and coaxed Eileen into taking what was to be her last trip to England and Germany, a wonderful experience for her.

Another bright spot was the publication of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* in 2004, a project that was right down Eileen's alley. She eagerly roamed through its pages with a keenly critical eye, looking for ways in which she might use her own researches to fill in a gap or correct a mistake. Ultimately sixteen entries credit Eileen for information, while others that drew on her suggestions are still in process. At the encouragement of Mark Curthoys, her contact at the *ODNB*, she wrote the updated entry for David Robinson, a key figure in the history of economic thought who had written for *Blackwood's* but about whose life only Eileen seemed to know anything. Mark has written me of Eileen's "immense generosity" and "undiminished enthusiasm" for unearthing the life stories of these obscure figures. "To correspond with Eileen," he notes, "as one of the *Wellesley's* original and continuing compilers, has had a special resonance, and has been a particular honour. One felt in the presence, through her messages, of one of the founders of Victorian studies as one knows it."

As her morale improved with the new opportunities for scholarly connections that the Internet had opened for her in later life, she also allowed herself to be persuaded to once again attend an RSVP conference, despite the physical strain that travel had become for her. Eileen attended three annual conferences in a row in the mid-2000s, re-connecting in person with many old RSVP colleagues and delighting to meet many younger ones to whom she had been only a name. In 2009, she inaugurated the Curran Fellowships through RSVP -- two annual prizes of \$2500 each to help enable scholars to travel to archives to do the kind of labor-intensive, primary-sources research on the Victorian press (both magazines and newspapers) that had been the hallmark of her own career. Details of the fellowships can be found in these pages, and also online at <http://www.rs4vp.org/prizes.html> Over the past four years these fellowships have provided crucial assistance to a wide variety of projects. Thanks to her foresight and generosity, the Curran Fellowship program of RSVP will continue to support and inspire research in our field for many years to come.

When I last spoke with Eileen in March of this year she was as bracingly clear-headed, loquacious, tartly opinionated, and restlessly curious as ever, despite her many physical

ailments. But encroaching blindness, which had at last made reading and writing impossible, had taken a terrible toll on her spirits. She often remarked, in that downright, matter-of-fact way she had, that she was ready to go. But we weren't at all ready to lose her. She was my great friend, and I will miss her always.

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