

Remoteness and connectedness in the Library world

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(Text to accompany PowerPoint presentation to Loch Computer group, 6.9.14)

It's surprisingly easy to explore themes of "remoteness" and "connectedness" in the library world. You have only to think of students connecting with e-books and e-journals (or indeed of the students at Florida Polytechnic University who have a library *entirely* stocked with e-books), or of librarians staffing the new "Ask a Librarian" online enquiry service, and the theme is easily very illustrated.

So I've decided not to pursue these clichés, but to trace some ideas of remoteness and connectedness around my own particular job within a modern academic library.

I'm the Digital Humanities Research Librarian at the University of St Andrews Library. This means pretty much whatever I want it to mean, since it's a newly invented post and I'm free to take it in various directions wherever I see opportunities arising.

What are the Digital Humanities?

- They are the area of study concerned with the intersection of Computing and the Humanities disciplines.
- They focus on the digitization and analysis of materials related to the established Humanities subject areas.
- They combine traditional study methodologies in these areas with Computing tools such as data visualisation, information retrieval, data mining, computational analysis and digital publishing.

In practical terms this often means that I'm working with staff in Special Collections to identify materials from their vaults which are likely to be of sufficient interest to people to be worth digitising and making publicly available on the web. I've set up the St Andrews Digital Collections Portal which provides access to an increasing number of "unique to St Andrews" rare books and manuscripts.

- Andrew Lang's Letters
- Poet Douglas Dunn's Red Notebook

Digitisation projects help to connect readers with documents buried in Special Collections strong-rooms.

There are connections between old and new...

- The *Chronique de Reims* in the Parker Library online database.
- *Jane Austen's Fiction Manuscripts*, digitised by the British Library.

- New technology is applied to old materials. A plethora of twenty-first-century applications lift medieval or eighteenth-century documents into a new space, creating for the paper originals a new digital essence.

Then you can think about making connections *within* these digital pages...

- You can, for example, search for occurrences of the word “teapot” within the text of Jane Austen’s manuscripts.
- To make that searching possible, texts need to be marked up using e.g. an XML editor such as oXygen.

Again in the **Biographical Register Database Project** which I manage, markup procedures make it possible for text to be translated into database format, so that people can make connections.

The Biographical Register of the University of St Andrews contains biographical information about St Andrews alumni 1747-1897. By converting this information into a database and making it searchable, we’d like to increase the number of connections which might be made. We will be able to tell, for example, how many generations of a particular family attended the university, or how many students came from particular places, or where they went on to after the completion of their studies. If we enter the names of professions – doctor, minister, lawyer, soldier etc. – we will be able to connect all the alumni who proceeded to these occupations. If we put in “declaration” we will connect the names of the alumni who signed the American Declaration of Independence. If we put in “thermos flask” we will reach information about alumnus James Dewar (1842-1923) who invented it. If we enter “body snatcher” we will be connected to information about the unfortunate alumnus David Ramsay. If we search for alumna “Ada Hill Walker” we will discover that she painted the attractive period pictures on the walls of the St Andrews New Picture House. If we search for “Gertrud von Petzold” we will be connected to the information that this St Andrews alumna was England’s first female minister in November 1904.

- This is how the Biographical Register looks as it is “marked up” by means of a CSS style-sheet in Dreamweaver.

Or again, there is the emerging **Developing Photopoetry project**, which aims to become a fully interactive “linked data” resource. This project would digitise c. 50 out-of-copyright photopoetry books, published between 1861 and 1921, and display them on a website using the Internet Archive’s turn-the-page viewer. The finished product will be more than just a series of static webpages, but rather a truly interactive resource -- the “go-to” website for all things photopoetry, capturing the attention of future students and scholars. Expert

commentary would be provided by a PhD student, who would supply text about each book displayed and be responsible for the intellectual input to the site. We would make this a “linked data” resource via which it will be possible, e.g., to connect to other works by each photographer and poet, to biographies of each, to places where each photographer’s collections are held, and to other photopoetry productions by each publisher. Vocabularies will be created for places and people photographed, for photographic media used (albumen prints, gravures etc), for verse types and for dates; this will make the site fully searchable e.g. for material by particular photographers or poets, or for books published between certain dates.

Sometimes there’s a real emotional connection with the *content* of the documents we work with in libraries...

- C.S. Catty, *Journal of a tour through Scotland*, June 1856.

Corbet Stacey Catty (1832-1923) and Caroline Gray (1833-1909) were married at Carry’s home, 2 Regent Terrace, Edinburgh, on 4th June 1856. Later that day they said farewell to their family and friends after the wedding breakfast at Corbet’s lodgings at 42 Albany Street, and set out on their marriage trip.

Corbet kept a diary of their daily activities as they travelled by train, horse-drawn carriage, steamer and rowing boat from Edinburgh to Bridge of Allan, Perth, Dunkeld, Blair Atholl, Kenmore, Callander, Loch Katrine, Loch Lomond, Inverary and Oban. The diary ends mid-sentence while the happy couple were halfway down the Crinan Canal, although the route traced on the map has them returning to Edinburgh via Dumbarton and Glasgow. It’s not clear whether the small volume was written as they travelled or is a fair copy of a draft diary taken at the time. (Words by M. Sheridan, *Echoes from the Vault* blog at <http://standrewsrarebooks.wordpress.com/>)

This diary is now in Special Collections, as [msDA865.C2](#), having been purchased in 1954 for £2.10s.

An extract:

June 5, 1856

Five o’clock had now arrived and the post chaise was ready at the door so after having bid adieu to my brother I descended and found dear Carry in the embrace of her many friends. All the guests had flocked into the passage while the steps were crowded with people and all down the terrace, the balconies were crowded with fair occupants anxious to catch a glimpse of us, the interesting couple. Amid the shakes of many hands, the showering of flowers and the prophetic discharge of various kinds of slippers, we managed to seat ourselves in the chaise – a crack of the whip

– off started the horses, round went the wheels and we were off – off on our marriage trip – the bride has left a mother’s home and the husband has entered on his new duties....

We reached Gogar, about 1/4 to 4 some time before the arrival of our train. When it arrived we found our coupe all ready for our reception. With our luggage safely stowed away we reached the Bridge of Allan a little after 5 and soon found ourselves comfortably housed in the private part of Philips Hotel, looking out on a pleasing garden. The evening was beautifully fine and tempted by this and the prompting of our own thoughts we sallied out for a little stroll in the wood above the house and finally on the level above where the mineral spring is situated.

Feeling the coming dampness of night we sought our inn and enjoyed a twilight view from our bay window which commanded a prospect of Stirling Castle. We were not so sentimental but what we could enjoy a hearty meal – my wife took the head of my board for the first time which not a little added to my zest of enjoyment....

[Accompanied by 2 pressed sprigs of *myosotis arvensis* (field forget-me-not)].

The journey was replicated in June 2014 by my Special Collections archivist colleague and her husband, who made connections between past and present throughout the trip, and wrote about the experience in the Special Collections blog *Echoes from the Vault* (July 3, 2014)...

“It was tremendous fun to mirror the Cattys on their honeymoon tour, using the diary and the guidebook for reference, looking for all the places they had visited and trying to see our 2014 world through their 1856 eyes. And it was notable how easy this was to do, reflecting a remarkable conservatism in Scottish infrastructure, and a wonderful preservation of the natural beauty of the Scottish landscape. The roads, bridges, hotels, landscapes and tourist attractions were all still extant more than 150 years later. Almost nothing had really vanished, only the old stone bridge over the Garry. Corbet and Carry would have recognised most of their surroundings if they had been travelling with us. We collected the same kind of flowers to press and stick into our scrapbook. We even shared very similar weather – sunshine and showers.” [Maia Sheridan, blogpost in *Echoes from the Vault* , June 2014]

A satisfying library “connection” to end on!