

Gender: Identity and Social Change in PhD research at Queen's University



Emma McTavish is a PhD candidate at Queen's University, Ontario, with a specialism in Victorian literature, life writing, gender and sexuality. The Munby Collection was originally going to form a chapter in a wider project, but when McTavish discovered Adam Matthew Digital was digitising the collection in the database [Gender: Identity and Social Change](#), she was able to devote her entire project to the archive.

"Part of what made my research possible was learning about the database right at the time when I was starting my dissertation", she said. Her doctoral dissertation now focuses on examining working women and noseless women as 'dirty' and 'disgusting' fetishized objects in Arthur Munby's diaries and photographic albums.

"Gender: Identity and Social Change made it possible for me to go in the direction that I was truly passionate about"

Searching strategies for online databases

Using Adam Matthew Digital's *Gender: Identity and Social Change*, McTavish quickly developed sophisticated strategies for researching digitised archival material. "I've never done archival research before, but the database was so easy to learn and to use", she explained. "And I think that speaks to how powerful the collection is; that I am a doctoral student, but an undergraduate could use it just as easily as I'm using it".

The Munby Collection contains a large amount of written and visual material. Munby completed sixty-four volumes of diaries over a period of forty years; the collection also contains his notebooks, letters, photographs, and drawings, as well as the diaries of Munby's wife, Hannah Cullwick. To research this volume of material, McTavish started with the document metadata, which included a document description that was usually taken from Munby's own index to the diary. Because Harriet Langdon – a woman whose nose and lips had been damaged by lupus vulgaris, and who Munby developed an obsession for – was central to McTavish's dissertation, she initially prioritised volumes that mentioned Langdon's name in the document description part of the metadata.

However, if Munby had omitted Langdon in his index, she might not always appear in the metadata. "So that's when I started using the Handwritten Text Recognition (HTR) tool, to search for the keywords within diaries". The keywords McTavish started her search with included "Harriet", "Langdon", "Harriet Langdon", "noseless", "disgust" and "dirt". Using these as her primary keywords, she soon started to notice patterns that pointed her towards the right passages, even when Harriet's name did not appear in the metadata. Using HTR, she also discovered another woman with visible disabilities in the diaries not referenced so far by any other Munby scholar. McTavish was therefore able to make a new archival discovery using HTR.

"For me, HTR was the most important tool that I could use working with the Munby Collection"

McTavish employed an iterative process between exploratory research and the use of targeted keywords. Using HTR allowed McTavish to isolate 1862 as a key year for passages on Harriet Langdon based on the density of keywords. She then read the 1862 diaries in more detail, finding more words Munby would use in connection with Langdon. Exploring the diaries without search terms allowed McTavish to discover secondary keywords like "hospital", "mask" and "veil". One of her main tips on using HTR included "getting comfortable with the archive itself and learning about the writer and what types of words they use".

"It's very important to be specific and to prioritise the information that you're looking for. But it's also really important to learn about the archive itself, so I give myself a certain amount of time just to explore the diaries without always using the search tool, just letting myself read about him and getting more of a sense of Munby."

McTavish worked with an Excel spreadsheet to tabulate her information, with different tabs for different thesis chapters. She created columns for the different metadata fields, like author, year and volume, a column for her own notes and a column for a transcription of the passage. The advantage of Excel was the ease with which it allowed McTavish to rearrange the columns to notice new patterns. Sorting her data by date showed 1862 as a key year for the relationship between Munby and Langdon, for example, which indicated the volumes to research in more depth. It also indicated to McTavish that she needed to do further social and historical research into public opinion around illness in 1862 to explain the intensity of Munby's interest in Langdon in that year and to situate her close readings in their precise socio-historical context.

Diaries: A unique primary source material

McTavish is based in the English Department at Queen's University, and she examines primary sources like diaries, sketches and photographic albums as forms of life-writing, a growing sub-field in literary studies. Discussing Hannah Cullwick's diaries in the context of life-writing, McTavish observed how "we don't have another archive like this, where we see a working woman using her first-person voice describing her day. There's nothing else like it – it's just incredible."

However, there were also difficulties in approaching Cullwick's diaries because they were inevitably bound up with her husband's gaze. Munby required Cullwick to write her diaries for him, a task she often resented. "But it also allowed Hannah a way to speak back against him", McTavish noted, "in a way that I don't think she would have been able to do in person." McTavish started her research after the #MeToo movement, which added a fresh urgency to the investigation of these problematic power relations underpinning Cullwick's diaries, and Munby's own positioning of his fetishes as acts of philanthropy.



“In her diaries, Hannah Cullwick found a way to exert some type of agency back over the person who held the position of power in the relationship – and to use that in a way to find her own sexuality.”

The diaries also presented important evidence for gaps in the archive and erasures of disability resulting from the male gaze. Munby wrote many passages about taking Langdon to be photographed. The male photographers often refused to take her picture, or refused to look at Langdon’s noseless face while taking her photograph. But none of these photographs exist today; Munby’s diaries, as filtered as they are through his own fetishizing gaze, are therefore important for identifying and interrogating the implications of the absence of these photographs from the archive.

Importance of databases for postgraduate research

Before the pandemic, McTavish had been able to view some of Arthur Munby’s written materials in person – “to see his handwriting, and to be able to touch the pages” – in the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Yale University. While the online database was more effective for conducting her actual PhD research, the physical archive allowed McTavish to experience an “emotional connection” with Munby. Being able to imagine herself “as Munby, writing at the page” helped her feel “more connected” to him as a writer. But she cited reasons like cost of travel, the importance of online search tools and the limited time for reading and photographing pages as reasons why the physical archive was not as well-suited as *Gender: Identity and Social Change* for the actual “getting down to business” part of her research.

“I wasn’t able to go on my research trip during the time of Covid. But I can sit at my lockdown desk and access these archives online.”

Online collections of primary sources have become crucial in complementing postgraduate and faculty research conducted in physical archives. The importance of online primary sources was only amplified during the Covid-19 pandemic. It forced McTavish to cancel her planned research trip to see the physical Munby Collection housed in the Wren Library at Trinity College, Cambridge. “I wouldn’t have been able to do my research without *Gender: Identity and Social Change*. This collection is everything to me”, McTavish said. “I wouldn’t have a dissertation project without the database.”

“I wouldn’t have a dissertation project without *Gender: Identity and Social Change*.”

Emma McTavish is a fourth-year PhD Candidate in English Literature at Queen’s University. She holds a BA (Honours) in English Literature with a Minor in Fine Arts from Bishop’s University and an MA in Public Texts (English Literature) from Trent University. Her work examines mid-Victorian ideas of physical and moral pollution and its intersections with cross-class desire and slumming. She will be presenting her research on the Munby Collection at the upcoming 2021 ACCUTE and VPFA conferences.

