

Promoting the Digital Literacy of Historians at the University of Wolverhampton Using Nineteenth Century British Library Newspapers Online

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This case study is based on a History Subject Centre funded project on the integration of 19th Century British Library Newspapers Online into a Level 2 history module, Victorian Britain, using the 'Bloody Sunday' Trafalgar Square Riot of 1887 as our example.

The Resource

In recent years a number of national libraries in the developed world, for example the United States Library of Congress and the National Library of Australia, have taken advantage of the development of digital scanning technology to digitise part of their collections of historic newspapers. Using digitised historic newspapers is very different from the experience historians had before this technological innovation. In the pre-digital age using newspapers was extremely time-consuming because only a handful of newspapers had indexed their nineteenth century issues, *The Times* being a notable example. Furthermore these indexes were often highly selective. Another issue from the pre-digital age was that most universities which held historic newspapers in their libraries, especially new ones, only had microfilm copies. Microfilms were very time-consuming to use and, if mistreated, tended to decay very quickly. Digitising historic newspapers resolves most of these issues.

The digitised newspaper resource used for this case study, Nineteenth Century British Library Newspapers, is the result of a joint venture between the British Library and Gale Cengage funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC). Currently, 49 national and regional newspapers from England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have been digitised. More than 2.2 million full text searchable pages have been made freely available, subject to a license.¹ A further 24 national and regional newspapers are currently being digitised representing an additional 2 million pages. However, 4 million pages represents only a small fraction of the 750 million pages of the total holdings of newspapers at the British Library.²

Digital Literacy

As José Manuel Pérez Tornero has observed, digital literacy requires both the traditional skills required for reading and writing as well as new technological literacy skills. But the technological skills required go far beyond being able to use the Google search engine.³ Effective digital literacy requires being able to navigate the following series of processes:

1. The first is selection. It requires the recognition and determination of the extent of the information that is needed.

¹ This resource is also available on a commercial basis to people not affiliated to a United Kingdom higher or further education institution. Details are available at the following website:

<http://newspapers.bl.uk/blcs/>

² *The Independent*, January 4, 2010, p.46; *Times Higher Education*, October 15, 2009, p.20; British Library, *British Library Newspapers Online [Leaflet]*

³ J.M. Pérez Tornero, *Understanding Digital Literacy*, Final Report (Brussels, 2004), pp.40-41

2. The second is access. It requires efficient access to the information required.
3. The third is integration/evaluation. It requires the evaluation of the information and its sources followed by the incorporation of the selected information into the base of knowledge.
4. The fourth is management. It requires the use of the information effectively on the basis of an established objective, such as a student essay.
5. The fifth is creation/production. It requires the information to be synthesized and the generation of the final product such as an essay.⁴

To successfully navigate these processes requires, as Pérez Tornero recommended in his report, the generation of an independent and critical awareness,⁵ which is an important attribute we would hope to be one of the learning outcomes for history undergraduates at the University of Wolverhampton.

However, the British Library online resource represents a further challenge. As a research note written by Matthew Robson, a 15 year old intern for Morgan Stanley's European Media Analysts in July 2009 suggests, teenagers today do not regularly read newspapers because most "cannot be bothered to read pages and pages of text."⁶ This note was probably "one of the most widely read notes ever published by Morgan Stanley"⁷ and suggests that most relatively well educated young people, from whom our undergraduates are drawn, are unlikely to have much experience using newspapers as a source of information. This adds to the challenge that most of our undergraduate historians will find in interpreting nineteenth century newspapers.

The Bloody Sunday Case Study

We chose the 'Bloody Sunday' disturbance of 13 November 1887 for our case study because it represents a pivotal moment in British history. The violent clash between demonstrators and police provides undergraduate historians with a microcosm of the significant economic, political, cultural and social tensions in late-Victorian society. In the months leading up to the event political tensions had been simmering leading to regular large-scale meetings in Trafalgar Square. The British Socialist movement had gained much impetus through groups such as the Social Democratic Federation and the Socialist League. Stump orators attracted large crowds with their critique of Government policy in Ireland, rising unemployment and deteriorating living conditions for London's working class and those experiencing abject poverty. 'Bloody Sunday' ushered in a new form of policing that aimed to minimise the effectiveness of demonstrations and progressive organizations. The violence directed at the demonstrators led to three deaths and many injuries.

The participants in 'Bloody Sunday' included a generation of socialists, trade unionists and political reformers who were to go on to have a lasting impact on British politics. The national and local newspapers provide portraits of the leading figures. Their biographies give students an insight to the culture and politics of socialist organisations in the 1880s. John Burns (1858-1943)⁸ was a working class

⁴ J.M. Pérez Tornero, *Understanding Digital Literacy*, p.46

⁵ J.M. Pérez Tornero, *Understanding Digital Literacy*, p.69

⁶ *Financial Times*, July 13, 2009, p.1

⁷ *Financial Times*, July 18, 2009, p.11

⁸ K.D. Brown, 'Burns, John Elliot (1858-1943)', in J.M. Bellamy and J. Saville (eds.), *Dictionary of Labour Biography* Vol. V (London, 1979) 39-47

socialist and trade unionist. He was committed to a moderate path to socialism, but in the mid-1880s flirted with more extreme forms of political action. He was jailed through his involvement in 'Bloody Sunday'. The involvement of Robert Cunninghame-Graham (1852-1936)⁹ a Scottish and Irish nationalist and Member of Parliament indicates the broad appeal of the rally and the attempt to build a progressive coalition of individuals and groups. Henry Hyndman (1842-1921)¹⁰, upper class socialist and translator of Marx's work presents an insight into the complexity of British socialism. Hyndman's speeches and writings point to the factionalism that divided the progressive cause in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Other noteworthy participants in the disturbances shed light on the more esoteric wing of the radicalism of the period. Annie Besant (1847-1933)¹¹ socialist, feminist and theosophist highlights the debates around gender and women's role in the domestic and public sphere and how these concerns were finding a role in the progressive political culture of London radicalism. Edward Carpenter (1844-1929)¹² and William Morris (1834-1896) symbolise the coalition of political identities that could be found in the slogans, songs, and speeches that epitomised the politics of the 'Bloody Sunday' protest.

The clash led socialists to re-think their industrial and political strategy and the response of the state created a much more pessimistic environment for progressive advance. Yet by the end of the nineteenth century Britain would witness the creation of the Labour Party, a strong trade union movement and moves towards electoral reform. More directly, 'Bloody Sunday' led to the creation of the Law and Liberty League and a broad based movement for free speech and civil liberties. Newspaper coverage gives students an insight in to how the media framed 'Bloody Sunday' through the political identities of the participants and the challenge that the event posed to the British state.

The 'Bloody Sunday' demonstrations provide students with a case study that can be explored through the national and local newspapers of the nineteenth century. The rich detail, testimony, opinion and coverage of 'Bloody Sunday' and its aftermath that can be garnered from the press introduces students to a range of issues, individuals and political strategies that would shape British society in the new century.

Promoting Digital Literacy at the University of Wolverhampton Using Nineteenth Century British Library Newspapers

Our project seeks to integrate Nineteenth Century British Library Newspapers Online into our Level 2 history module, *Victorian Britain*, using the 'Bloody Sunday' Trafalgar Square Riot of 1887 as a case study. There were 50 students on the 12 week module which was team taught by three historians. So as part of this project, using our Bloody Sunday case study, we showed our students how to make the most effective use of this digital resource. Given the issue highlighted by Robson in the research note referred to above, we did not assume that our students would be familiar with using newspapers to gather information. Hence for this project we provided a 1½ hour lecture and 1½ hour workshop on

⁹ M. Espinasse, 'Cunninghame Graham, Robert Bontine (1852-1936)', in J.M. Bellamy and J. Saville (eds.), *Dictionary of Labour Biography Vol. VI* (London, 1982) 83-91

¹⁰ G. Johnson, 'Hyndman, Henry Mayers (1842-1921)', in J. M. Bellamy and J. Saville (eds.), *Dictionary of Labour Biography Vol. X* (Basingstoke, 2000) 101-111

¹¹ D. Rubinstein, 'Besant, Annie (1847-1933)', in J. M. Bellamy and J. Saville (eds.), *Dictionary of Labour Biography Vol. 4* (London, 1976) 21-31

¹² See S. Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter: A Life of Liberty and Love* (London, 2008) esp. chapter 6

using newspapers as a primary source. We drew their attention to the type of issues identified by Stephen Vella in his essay on how to interpret newspaper articles,¹³ such as the political affiliation of the newspaper, the accuracy of the stories, the possibility of bias and the context of the article being used. The importance of these issues was illustrated by examples from newspapers from Nineteenth Century Newspapers Online. One such example is the *Pall Mall Gazette*. W.T. Stead, an editor of this sensationalist newspaper in the 1880s, largely fabricated a series of four articles in July 1885 on an alleged London ‘trade’ in young girls for the purpose of prostitution in order to successfully force the government to act on the age of consent.¹⁴

Although most of our students have been using ICT for many years we did not make any assumptions about their level of digital literacy, that is to say we did not assume that they are able to make effective use of a search engine to collect material to prepare an essay. In addition to covering the processes identified by Pérez Tornero, we also showed how it was necessary to be aware that Victorians sometimes used different terminology compared to modern-day English, for example ‘reformatories’ as opposed to ‘youth offender institutions’.

Furthermore, a search engine will identify every article with the word placed in the search engine. So if you were researching the career of a Victorian politician called ‘John Smith’, you would be overwhelmed by the number of articles resulting from a search based on the words ‘John Smith’. Unfortunately only searches for people with unusual surnames such as ‘Samuel Untermyer’ are likely to bring up a manageable number of results. So as part of this case study we show our students how to refine their search. Using our example from the history of Victorian Britain we can show how to use the search engine effectively. Using the search term ‘Trafalgar Square Riot’ produces 35 articles of which 33 were relevant. Using the search term ‘Bloody Sunday’ produces 135 articles, most of which are not relevant. However, by refining our search by imposing time limits of November 1, 1887 to June 1, 1888 we reduce our results to 36 relevant articles, most of which are different from the articles we identified from our previous search.

In order to assess the effectiveness of our lecture and workshop one of the two essays for the module was partly based on the use of this digital resource. Students were required to use newspaper articles along with other sources such as books and academic articles to prepare their answers to an essay question taken from a choice of topics on different themes from the history of Victorian Britain.

Results of the Project

The student essays that resulted from this project reflected to a certain extent the range of aptitude levels of the student cohort and their differing levels of engagement with the material available to them. The essays highlight several issues. First, it was not sufficient to brief the students in a workshop about the differences between Victorian and modern-day English. Some students still clearly struggled to comprehend the Victorian newspaper articles they used for their essays. One solution to this issue in future years might be to provide a glossary of archaic Victorian words they are likely to encounter in the articles. Second, in a number of cases only one newspaper article had been used, which suggested an

¹³ S. Vella, “Newspapers”, in M. Dobson and B. Ziemann (eds.), *Reading Primary Sources: The interpretation of texts from nineteenth- and twentieth century history*, (London, 2009), pp.192-208

¹⁴ M. Maguire, *Precarious childhood in post-independence Ireland*, (Manchester, 2009), p.116

unwillingness to engage with primary sources when “excellent” web-based secondary sources, such as Wikipedia, present information “relevant” to the essay in a much more easily comprehensible form. A solution to this issue might be to specify a minimum number of newspaper articles for the essay such as five. Third, some students had problems with chronology. Their essays focused on the whole of the nineteenth century rather than solely on Queen Victoria’s reign. A solution to this issue might be to include in the module guide essay question details a statement reminding the students that Queen Victoria reigned from 1837 to 1901.

On the other hand, a number of students did engage with the resource in a way which enhanced their learning experience. They used several newspaper articles to illustrate their essays, providing primary evidence to support the material they used from secondary sources. Some of these students also used newspaper articles from the regional press to provide examples from the West Midlands to illustrate essays on topics such as public health. This allowed them to reflect on the extent to which the regional experience during the Victorian period reflected that of the national experience. One student, who answered a question on nineteenth-century prostitution, used articles on brothels in Victorian Wolverhampton to create a map showing their location using a template from Google Maps. This is an excellent example of the potential for data mashing provided by the British Library resource.

The use of newspapers also fed into seminar discussion of complex issues such as the rise of the labour movement in British society and the variety of socialist identities that were competing for prominence in Victorian progressive politics. Some of the more able and confident students were willing to draw on newspaper material to inform their contribution to discussion and underpin their written analyses of nineteenth century themes. Overall, the teaching team felt that the use of the nineteenth century digitised newspapers enhanced both the delivery of the *Victorian Britain* module and the student experience of engaging with primary sources.

This resource provides students with the opportunity to engage with primary sources without the mediation of their lecturers. Previously most primary sources used in undergraduate history teaching in British higher education have been selected, reproduced, and distributed to the students. Nineteenth Century British Library Newspapers Online has the potential to enhance the development of independent learning and will be of great value to undergraduates undertaking Level 3 history dissertations or independent study in the field of nineteenth century British history. However, this case study suggests that when students are introduced to this resource at Level 2, they will need some guidance in order to effectively use this resource.

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