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Book Reviews-Monographic Musings

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Climbing the Digital Everest: The Journey to Digitize the Nineteenth Century

by Ray Abruzzi (Director, Strategic Planning, Gale, part of Cengage Learning)

Most may not liken digitizing nineteenth-century manuscripts and playbills to facing life-threatening conditions while climbing the largest peak in the world, but the nineteenth century was, without a doubt, one of the most exciting and revolutionary periods in our history. In many ways, it’s the equivalent of the “Digital Everest” to historians, archivists, and curators alike.

When one of the earliest Everest-attempters George Mallory was asked the question, “Why climb Mt. Everest?” he famously answered, “Because it is there.” In our case, we chose to climb the Digital Everest because, well, our customers asked us to.

And like any good mountaineer will tell you, make sure you bring the right tools and equipment and never climb alone. At Gale, we took this advice to heart.

The Idea and The Reality

It was shortly after Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO) launched in 2003 that customers began asking when we would do “the same thing” for the nineteenth century. ECCO had changed the face of digital scholarship and there was no going back. We saw the logic and the opportunity. Eight years later, we are delivering on that promise, and what transpired in that time happened in neither the sequence nor the manner we had planned.

Soon after stating we would tackle the nineteenth century, we realized that the scope and scale of such an endeavor was simply too large an undertaking with the technologies then available. The amount of publishing in the nineteenth century dwarfs that of the eighteenth century (thanks to the steam-driven printing press, increased literacy rates, and many other factors). Existing bibliographies did not begin to cover the scope of material available. How could we approach the mammoth goal of comprehensively digitizing the nineteenth century — the books, the manuscripts, the images, the newspapers, the pamphlets, and more? Well, we didn’t — at least not immediately.

Instead, we put our efforts into several other ventures. These include 19th Century British Library Newspapers, 17th and 18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers, The Making of the Modern World, and a second part of ECCO. These relatively smaller programs met with success over several years, and we continued to develop archives around single content types (generally either books or newspapers) until 2008, when Gale took another step forward with Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive (SAS).

SAS was launched as an ambitious five-year publishing program that relied on expert advisors to select content and on new technology to integrate multiple content types. No longer was Gale publishing a collection of (just) newspapers, or (just) monographs, or (just) manuscripts; rather, SAS brought together in a single place multiple content types, and SAS made them all work together seamlessly. Gale tackled a new challenge in 2009, embarking on a plan to bring a long history of scholarly publishing via our major reference imprints, Macmillan Reference USA and Charles Scribner’s Sons, together with aggregated secondary sources (journals, videos, maps, etc.). The tricky part followed when we had to match them alongside primary sources on the same scale as our existing digital archives. The result is Gale’s World Scholar program. The first installment, focusing on Latin America and the Caribbean, was published in April 2011, after two years of groundbreaking work. World Scholar is a new kind of library/classroom resource that integrates more than a million pages of digitized primary sources — dating from the 15th century into the early 20th — with secondary sources and topic portals devoted to major areas of interest in Latin American studies. Following shortly will be Gale World Scholar: The Middle East.

World Scholar also represents Gale’s first major foray in two complementary, synchronous methodologies of product creation: user-driven product design and “AGILE” development.

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