

Lost and Now Found: The Search for the Hidden and Forgotten Rob Allen

Abstract

The Digital Turn

Much of the 19th century disappeared from public view during the 20th century. Historians recovered what they could from archives and libraries, with the easy pickings-the famous and the fortunate-coming first. Latterly, social and political historians of different hues determinedly sought out the more hidden, forgotten, and marginalised. However, there were always limitations to resources-time, money, location, as well as purpose, opportunity, and permission. 'History' was principally a professionalised and privileged activity dominated by academics who had preferential access to, and significant control over, the resources, technologies and skills required, as well as the social, economic and cultural framework within which history was recovered, interpreted, approved and disseminated.

Digitisation and the broader development of new communication technologies has, however, transformed historical research processes and practice dramatically, removing many constraints, opening up many opportunities, and allowing many others than the professional historian to trace and track what would have remained hidden, forgotten, or difficult to find, as well as verify (or otherwise), what has already been claimed and concluded. In the 21st century, the SEARCH button has become a dominant tool of research. This, along with other technological and media developments, has altered the practice of historians-professional or 'public'-who can now range deep and wide in the collection, portrayal and dissemination of historical information, in and out of the confines of the traditional institutional walls of retained information, academia, location, and national boundaries.

This incorporation of digital technologies into academic historical practice generally, has raised, as Cohen and Rosenzweig, in their book *Digital History*, identified a decade ago, not just promises, but perils. For the historian, there has been the move, through digitisation, from the relative scarcity and inaccessibility of historical material to its (over) abundance, but also the emerging acceptance that, out of both necessity and preference, a hybridity of sources will be the foreseeable way forward. There has also been a significant shift, as De Groot notes in his book *Consuming History*, in the often conflicted relationship between popular/public history and academic history, and the professional and the 'amateur' historian. This has brought a potentially beneficial democratization of historical practice but also an associated set of concerns around the loss of control of both practice and product of the professional historian. Additionally, the development of digital tools for the collection and dissemination of 'history' has raised fears around the commercialised development of the subject's brand, products and commodities. This article considers the significance and implications of some of these changes through one protracted act of recovery and reclamation in which the digital made the difference: the life of a notorious 19th century professional agitator on both sides of the Atlantic, John De Morgan. A man thought lost, but now found.

"Who Is John De Morgan?"

The search began in 1981, linked to the study of contemporary "race riots" in South East London. The initial purpose was to determine whether there was a history of rioting in the area. In the Local History Library, a calm and dusty backwater, an early find was a fading, but evocative and puzzling, photograph of "The Plumstead Common Riots" of 1876. It showed a group of men and women, posing for the photographer on a hillside-the technology required stillness, even in the middle of a riot-spades in hand, filling in a Mr. Jacob's sandpits, illegally dug from what was supposed to be common land. The leader of this, and other similar riots around England, was John De Morgan. A local journalist who covered the riots commented: "Of Mr. De Morgan little is known before or since the period in which he flashed meteorlike through our section of the atmosphere, but he was indisputably a remarkable man" (Vincent 588). Thus began a trek, much interrupted, sometimes unmapped and haphazard, to discover more about this 'remarkable man'. "Who is John De Morgan" was a question frequently asked by his many contemporary antagonists, and by subsequent historians, and one to which De Morgan deliberately gave few answers. The obvious place to start the search was the British Museum Reading Room, resplendent in its Victorian grandeur, the huge card catalogue still in the 1980s the dominating technology. Together with the Library's newspaper branch at Colindale, this was likely to be the repository of all that might then easily be known about De Morgan.

From 1869, at the age of 21, it appeared that De Morgan had embarked on a life of radical politics that took him through the UK, made him notorious, lead to accusations of treasonable activities, sent him to jail twice, before he departed unexpectedly to the USA in 1880. During that period, he was involved with virtually every imaginable radical cause, at various times a temperance advocate, a spiritualist, a First Internationalist, a Republican, a Tichbornite, a Commoner, an anti-vaccinator, an advanced Liberal, a parliamentary candidate, a Home Ruler. As a radical, he, like many radicals of the period, "zigzagged nomadically through the mayhem of nineteenth century politics fighting various foes in the press, the clubs, the halls, the pulpit and on the street" (Kazin 202). He promoted himself as the "People's Advocate, Champion and Friend" (Allen). Never a joiner or follower, he established a variety of organizations, became a professional agitator and orator, and supported himself and his politics through lecturing and journalism. Able to attract huge crowds to "monster meetings", he achieved fame, or more correctly notoriety. And then, in 1880, broke and in despair, he disappeared from public view by emigrating to the USA.

Lost

The view of De Morgan as a "flashing meteor" was held by many in the 1870s. Historians of the 20th century took a similar position and, while considering him intriguing and culturally interesting, normally dispatched him to the footnotes. By the latter part of the 20th century, he was described as "one of the most notorious radicals of the 1870s yet remains a shadowy figure" and was generally dismissed as "a swashbuckling demagogue," a "democratic messiah," and "if not a bandit ... at least an adventurer" (Allen 684). His politics were deemed to be reactionary, peripheral, and, worst of all, populist. He was certainly not of sufficient interest to pursue across the Atlantic. In this dismissal, he fell foul of the highly politicised professional culture of mid-to-late 20th-century academic historians. In particular, the lack of any significant direct linkage to the story of the rise of a working class, and specifically the British Labour party, left individuals like De Morgan in the margins and footnotes. However, in terms of historical practice, it was also the case that his mysterious entry into public life, his rapid rise to brief notability and notoriety, and his sudden disappearance, made the investigation of his career too technically difficult to be worthwhile.

The footprints of the forgotten may occasionally turn up in the archived papers of the important, or in distant public archives and records, but the primary sources are the newspapers of the time. De Morgan was a regular, almost daily, visitor to the pages of the multitude of newspapers, local and national, that were published in Victorian Britain and Gilded Age USA. He also published his own, usually short-lived and sometimes eponymous, newspapers: *De Morgan's Monthly* and *De Morgan's Weekly* as well as the splendidly titled *People's Advocate and National Vindicator of Right versus Wrong* and the deceptively titled, highly radical, *House and Home*. He was highly mobile: he noted, without too much hyperbole, that in the 404 days between his English prison sentences in the mid-1870s, he had 465 meetings, travelled 32,000 miles, and addressed 500,000 people. Thus the newspapers of the time are littered with often detailed and vibrant accounts of his speeches, demonstrations, and riots.

Nonetheless, the 20th-century technologies of access and retrieval continued to limit discovery. The white gloves, cradles, pencils and paper of the library or archive, sometimes supplemented by the century-old 'new' technology of the microfilm, all enveloped in a culture of hallowed (and pleasurable) silence, restricted the researcher looking to move into the lesser known and certainly the unknown. The fact that most of De Morgan's life was spent, it was thought, outside of England, and outside the purview of the British Library, only exacerbated the problem. At a time when a historian had to travel to the sources and then work directly on them, pencil in hand, it needed more than curiosity to keep searching. Even as many historians in the late part of the century shifted their centre of gravity from the known to the unknown and from the great to the ordinary, in any form of intellectual or resource cost-benefit analysis, De Morgan was a non-starter.

Unknown

On the subject of his early life, De Morgan was tantalisingly and deliberately vague. In his speeches and newspapers, he often leaked his personal and emotional struggles as well as his political battles. However, when it came to his biographical story, he veered between the untruthful, the denial, and the obscure. To the twentieth century observer, his life began in 1869 at the age of 21 and ended at the age of 32. His various political campaign "biographies" gave some hints, but what little he did give away was often vague, coy and/or unlikely. His name was actually John Francis Morgan, but he never formally acknowledged it. He claimed, and was very proud, to be Irish and to have been educated in London and at Cambridge University (possible but untrue), and also to have been "for the first twenty years of his life directly or indirectly a railway servant," and to have been a "boy orator" from the age of ten (unlikely but true). He promised that "Some day-nay any day-that the public desire it, I am ready to tell the story of my strange life from earliest recollection to the present time" (St. Clair 4). He never did and the 20th century could unearth little evidence in relation to any of his claims.

The blend of the vague, the unlikely and the unverifiable-combined with an inclination to self-glorification and hyperbole-surrounded De Morgan with an aura, for historians as well as contemporaries, of the self-seeking, untrustworthy charlatan with something to hide and little to say. Therefore, as the 20th century moved to closure, the search for John De Morgan did so as well. Though interesting, he gave most value in contextualising the lives of Victorian radicals more generally. He headed back to the footnotes.

Now Found

Meanwhile, the technologies underpinning academic practice generally, and history specifically, had changed. The photocopier, personal computer, Internet, and mobile device, had arrived. They formed the basis for both resistance and revolution in academic practices. For a while, the analytical skills of the academic community were concentrated on the perils as much as the promises of a "digital history" (Cohen and Rosenzweig *Digital*).

But as the Millennium turned, and the academic community itself spawned, *inter alia*, Google, the practical advantages of digitisation for history forced themselves on people. Google enabled the confident searching from a neutral place for things known and unknown; information moved to the user more easily in both time and space. The culture and technologies of gathering, retrieval, analysis, presentation and preservation altered dramatically and, as a result, the traditional powers of gatekeepers, institutions and professional historians was redistributed (De Groot). Access and abundance, arguably over-abundance, became the platform for the management of historical information. For the search for De Morgan, the door reopened. The increased global electronic access to extensive databases, catalogues, archives, and public records, as well as people who knew, or wanted to know, something, opened up opportunities that have been rapidly utilised and expanded over the last decade. Both professional and "amateur" historians moved into a space that made the previously difficult to know or unknowable now accessible.

Inevitably, the development of digital newspaper archives was particularly crucial to seeking and finding John De Morgan. After some faulty starts in the early 2000s, characterised as a "wild west" and a "gold rush" (Fyfe 566), comprehensive

digitised newspaper archives became available. While still not perfect, in terms of coverage and quality, it is a transforming technology. In the UK, the British Newspaper Archive (BNA)-in pursuit of the goal of the digitising of all UK newspapers-now has over 20 million pages. Each month presents some more of De Morgan. Similarly, in the US, [Fulton History](#), a free newspaper archive run by retired computer engineer Tom Tryniski, now has nearly 40 million pages of New York newspapers. The almost daily footprints of De Morgan's radical life can now be seen, and the lives of the social networks within which he worked on both sides of the Atlantic, come easily into view even from a desk in New Zealand.

The Internet also allows connections between researchers, both academic and 'public', bringing into reach resources not otherwise knowable: a Scottish genealogist with a mass of data on De Morgan's family; a Californian with the historian's pot of gold, a collection of over 200 letters received by De Morgan over a 50 year period; a Leeds Public Library blogger uncovering spectacular, but rarely seen, Victorian electoral cartoons which explain De Morgan's precipitate departure to the USA. These discoveries would not have happened without the infrastructure of the Internet, web site, blog, and e-mail. Just how different searching is can be seen in the following recent scenario, one of many now occurring. An addition in 2017 to the BNA shows a Master J.F. Morgan, aged 13, giving lectures on temperance in Ledbury in 1861, luckily a census year. A check of the census through Ancestry shows that Master Morgan was born in Lincolnshire in England, and a quick look at the 1851 census shows him living on an isolated blustery hill in Yorkshire in a railway encampment, along with 250 navvies, as his father, James, works on the construction of a tunnel. Suddenly, literally within the hour, the 20-year search for the childhood of John De Morgan, the supposedly Irish-born "gentleman who repudiated his class," has taken a significant turn.

At the end of the 20th century, despite many efforts, John De Morgan was therefore a partial character bounded by what he said and didn't say, what others believed, and the intellectual and historiographical priorities, technologies, tools and processes of that century. In effect, he "lived" historically for a less than a quarter of his life. Without digitisation, much would have remained hidden; with it there has been, and will still be, much to find. De Morgan hid himself and the 20th century forgot him. But as the technologies have changed, and with it the structures of historical practice, the question that even De Morgan himself posed – "Who is John De Morgan?" – can now be addressed.

Searching

Digitisation brings undoubted benefits, but its impact goes a long way beyond the improved search and detection capabilities, into a range of technological developments of communication and media that impact on practice, practitioners, institutions, and 'history' itself. A dominant issue for the academic community is the control of "history." De Groot, in his book *Consuming History*, considers how history now works in contemporary popular culture and, in particular, examines the development of the sometimes conflicted relationship between popular/public history and academic history, and the professional and the 'amateur' historian.

The traditional legitimacy of professional historians has, many argue, been eroded by shifts in technology and access with the power of traditional cultural gatekeepers being undermined, bypassing the established control of institutions and professional historian. While most academics now embrace the primary tools of so-called "digital history," they remain, De Groot argues, worried that "history" is in danger of becoming part of a discourse of leisure, not a professionalized arena (18). An additional concern is the role of the global capitalist market, which is developing, or even taking over, 'history' as a brand, product and commodity with overt fiscal value. Here the huge impact of newspaper archives and genealogical software (sometimes owned in tandem) is of particular concern.

There is also the new challenge of "navigating the chaos of abundance in online resources" (De Groot 68). By 2005, it had become clear that:

the digital era seems likely to confront historians-who were more likely in the past to worry about the scarcity of surviving evidence from the past-with a new 'problem' of abundance. A much deeper and denser historical record, especially one in digital form seems like an incredible opportunity and a gift. But its overwhelming size means that we will have to spend a lot of time looking at this particular gift horse in mouth. (Cohen and Rosenzweig, *Web*).

This easily accessible abundance imposes much higher standards of evidence on the historian. The acceptance within the traditional model that much could simply not be done or known with the resources available meant that there was a greater allowance for not knowing. But with a search button and public access, democratizing the process, the consumer as well as the producer can see, and find, for themselves.

Taking on some of these challenges, Zaagsma, having reminded us that the history of digital humanities goes back at least 60 years, notes the need to get rid of the "myth that historical practice can be uncoupled from technological, and thus methodological developments, and that going digital is a choice, which, I cannot emphasize strongly enough, it is not" (14). There is no longer a digital history which is separate from history, and with digital technologies that are now ubiquitous and pervasive, historians have accepted or must quickly face a fundamental break with past practices. However, also noting that the great majority of archival material is not digitised and is unlikely to be so, Zaagsma concludes that hybridity will be the "new normal," combining "traditional/analogue and new/digital practices at least in information gathering" (17).

Conclusion

A decade on from Cohen and Rozenzweig's "Perils and Promises," the digital is a given. Both historical practice and historians have changed, though it is a work in progress. An early pioneer of the use of computers in the humanities, Robert Busa wrote in 1980 that "the principal aim is the enhancement of the quality, depth and extension of research and not merely the lessening of human effort and time" (89). Twenty years later, as Google was launched, Jordanov,

taking on those who would dismiss public history as "mere" popularization, entertainment or propaganda, argued for the "need to develop coherent positions on the relationships between academic history, the media, institutions...and popular culture" (149). As the digital turn continues, and the SEARCH button is just one part of that, all historians-professional or "amateur"-will take advantage of opportunities that technologies have opened up. Looking across the whole range of transformations in recent decades, De Groot concludes: "Increasingly users of history are accessing the past through complex and innovative media and this is reconfiguring their sense of themselves, the world they live in and what history itself might be about" (310).

References

Allen, Rob. "'The People's Advocate, Champion and Friend': The Transatlantic Career of Citizen John De Morgan (1848-1926)." *Historical Research* 86.234 (2013): 684-711.

Busa, Roberto. "The Annals of Humanities Computing: The Index Thomisticus." *Computers and the Humanities* 14.2 (1980): 83-90.

Cohen, Daniel J., and Roy Rosenzweig. *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web*. Philadelphia, PA: U Pennsylvania P, 2005.

———. "Web of Lies? Historical Knowledge on the Internet." *First Monday* 10.12 (2005).

De Groot, Jerome. *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*. 2nd ed. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.

De Morgan, John. *Who Is John De Morgan? A Few Words of Explanation, with Portrait. By a Free and Independent Elector of Leicester*. London, 1877.

Fyfe, Paul. "An Archaeology of Victorian Newspapers." *Victorian Periodicals Review* 49.4 (2016): 546-77.

"Interchange: The Promise of Digital History." *Journal of American History* 95.2 (2008): 452-91.

Johnston, Leslie. "Before You Were Born, We Were Digitizing Texts." *The Signal* 9 Dec. 2012, Library of Congress. <<https://blogs.loc.gov/thesignal/292/12/before-you-were-born-we-were-digitizing-texts>>.

Jordanova, Ludmilla. *History in Practice*. 2nd ed. London: Arnold, 2000.

Kazin, Michael. *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan*. New York: Anchor Books, 2006.

Saint-Clair, Sylvester. *Sketch of the Life and Labours of J. De Morgan, Elocutionist, and Tribune of the People*. Leeds: De Morgan & Co., 1880.

Vincent, William T. *The Records of the Woolwich District, Vol. II*. Woolwich: J.P. Jackson, 1890.

Zaagsma, Gerban. "On Digital History." *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review* 128.4 (2013): 3-29.

Keywords

digital; Victorian; historiography

Copyright

(c)

2017

Rob

Allen



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

- an  publication
- Supported by  **creative industries**
- Copyright © M/C, 1998-2016

- **ISSN 1441-2616**

- [About M/C](#)
- [Contact M/C](#)
- [Site Map](#)

- [XHTML](#)
- [CSS](#)
- [Accessibility](#)

