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## *The ECCO Revolution\**

by Robert D. Hume

*Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* (ECCO), made available by Gale, part of Cengage Learning — is genuinely revolutionary. It changes both our research and our teaching in eighteenth-century studies in radical ways. I suspect that even those people who have been using this database since it started to come on line in 2003 have barely begun to realize the extent and nature of what *ECCO* can help us do. The potentialities of the new and unfamiliar can be hard to get one's head around, however obvious they may seem in hindsight. Back in 1943 Thomas Watson, then chairman of IBM, is reported to have said "I think there is a world market for maybe five computers," and as late as 1977 the president of Digital opined that "There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home." Just as many faculty still use computers merely as glorified electric typewriters, so a lot of the people I have talked with about *ECCO* see it as an efficient way of getting access to texts that they would once have had to travel to Harvard or the Folger or the British Library to read. Used thus, it is merely a more convenient way of accessing the *English Short Title Catalog* (ESTC) microfilms from which it has been digitized. But this is to miss the whole point.

What does *ECCO* do? In theory and to a considerable degree in practice, it aims to provide fully searchable texts of all titles printed in England or in English from 1701 through 1800 — roughly 150,000 of them. Thus *ECCO* includes (or to be more precise, will eventually include) at least some editions of all ESTC books 1701-1800 printed in the United Kingdom and Ireland (including those in foreign languages) — which means a surprising number of books in Latin, French, and Italian as well as those in English. What does this do for us? Well, the obvious. We can read and cite virtually all eighteenth-century books without trekking round the world in search of copies. What you get is (usually) a very readable facsimile of the original printing, illustrations and all. An electronic Table of Contents is supplied, which greatly facilitates navigation around large and sometimes eccentrically organized books. You can download text in PDF form (in fifty-page chunks) and print it. You can call up any book at any time from any place you have a broadband connection. I spent much of my 2004-05 sabbatical in London reading eighteenth-century books — not in the British Library but in our flat in Islington (and sometimes in bed). And when I was in the British Library I often used *ECCO* rather than waiting hours or days for someone to fetch a copy of something.



The ready availability of practically all eighteenth-century books boggles the mind of one who remembers struggling to get access to copies of all plays performed in London 1660-1710 for *The Development of English Drama in the Late Seventeenth Century* (1976). I read a lot of those plays on Readex Microcards. The plays appeared in deep-underwater green, and I had to refocus every page or two. Printing from them was not then possible. *ECCO* puts us in a different — and vastly improved — scholarly universe.

Accessible is wonderful, but the crux is searchable. We can now easily find all sorts of material that until now we could never have hoped to know about — which is what makes *ECCO* fabulous. Here is just one example. Michael Burden invited Judith Milhous and me to contribute an article on the castrato Farinelli to a special issue of *BJECS*. Scholarly understanding of Farinelli's three seasons in London (1734-1737) has been based almost entirely on a very small number of scattered references — a few well-known letters and newspaper items. Type "Farinelli" into *ECCO*'s "full-text" search engine, and within a few seconds you will get a list of 452 "hits." Click on a title, and you will go to the facsimile reproduction of the original book. Click on a number in the list of pages containing the search-string, and you will be taken right to the word on that page, highlighted for easy spotting. Many of the Farinelli hits were just passing references to a famous name — but we also found quite a lot of substantive commentary in items of whose existence we were totally unaware. We would never have thought to look

at them even if we had possessed easy access to a copy, and we would not have been prepared to spend hours skimming them on the off-chance that a reference to Farinelli might be lurking somewhere therein. For instance, some cutting satirical references to Farinelli turned up in

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Robert Baker's *Rehearsal of a New Ballad Opera* (1737). I had never looked at the piece, even though I have published a book on Fielding and 1730s theatre. Some extremely important commentary on Farinelli as actor is to be found in Roger Pickering's (?) *Reflections upon Theatrical Expression in Tragedy* (1755). I had actually skimmed the *Reflections* thirty years ago, but, if I noticed the extensive and derogatory account of Farinelli, I had totally forgotten it. Neither of us had ever looked at *A Trip Through the Town* (1735), but it proved a happy discovery, containing substantive topical commentary on Farinelli early in his stay in England. The point is simple: with "full-text search capacity" you can find in an hour or two what months of dreary searching by old-fashioned means would never have turned up. For tiny, nitty-gritty, nagging problems, *ECCO* can produce magical solutions to what would heretofore have been essentially hopeless cases. Illustration: Judith Milhous and I are in the process of publishing the manuscript of Garrick's



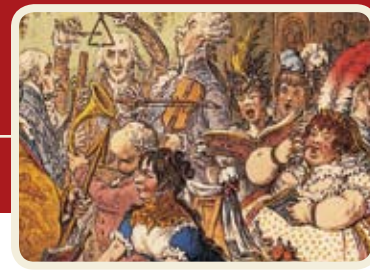
last rehearsal-skit, hitherto overlooked by scholars. In it he has very minor actors give snatches of utterly trivial speeches from unidentified plays. A servant says to Manly, “My lord desires to speak with you.” Type the line into *ECCO* and you will discover in a minute or two that this is from the Vanbrugh-Cibber *Provok’d Husband* (1728). Footnote triumphantly completed. Previously one could send a forlorn-hope question to *Notes and Queries*, wait six months, and probably never get an answer.

Questions such as “Where is this from?” are made for *ECCO*. Here are two examples from a current project. Among the Patmore MSS in the British Library are a number of fragments and single acts from anonymous and untitled plays. Many of them were probably never completed or published and some are probably later than 1800, but taking short passages and doing a full-text search for them produced some identifications that only the wildest kind of fluke could have yielded. From Add. MS 26,024(b) I tried searching “Bromley N4 Lady Mary” (meaning: find the string “Bromley” within four words of “Lady Mary”) and, bingo, I discovered that I had a partial copy of Elizabeth Griffith’s *The Times* (Drury Lane 1779; pub. 1780) that could be compared with the printed text and the Larpent manuscript at the Huntington. Searching “to invite a man she never spoke” revealed that Add. MS 26,035(b) is an act from Mrs Holford’s *Neither’s the Man* (Theatre Royal, Chester, 1798; published in London the same year). Let me point out that *ECCO*’s “proximity searching” (used in the Griffith

case) is enormously valuable. It lets you eliminate clutter or common words that might get a lot of extraneous hits. Experience will quickly show you that experimentation pays off. Varying the search terms, the kind of search (title, keyword, or full-text), the nature of the search (single word or phrase versus proximity), and the degree of precision (exact versus some level of “fuzzy” variation) produces astonishingly different results. Practice does not make perfect (every search engine has its kinks and quirks), but it unquestionably helps.

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The illustrations just given were for solutions of small, particular problems. At the other extreme, *ECCO* will generate long lists of potential sources for a big, wide-ranging project. I am in the early stages of research for a book tentatively titled *The Economics of Culture in London, 1660-1820* that will cover the cost of buying (and the earnings from producing) plays, operas, concerts, instruments, books, paintings, and engravings. I can punch in some keywords, and in minutes I have long lists of potential sources — most of them books I never heard of. “Money” as a keyword (i.e., not in a full-text search) yields 3263 hits. “Money N10 value” (find “money” within ten words of “value” in all eighteenth-century books) in full-text produces 13,171 hits. “Book N10 value” generates 3781. I could spend months or years combing printed bibliographies, library catalogues, and other people’s footnotes, trying in



hit-or-miss ways to find books and pamphlets that have relevant material — and then I would have to try to locate copies and skim them, hoping I did not blink at the wrong moment. *ECCO* lets us do things in days or weeks that we would never have thought of attempting. I dislike sloppy use of the term “paradigm shift,” and I shall refrain from applying it, but *ECCO* truly does put us in a new scholarly universe.

The improvement in research efficiency is quite fantastic, but what is mind-boggling is the full-text search access it gives us to material we did not know existed and would have had no way to know we should explore.

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What of teaching applications? Many small schools will probably resist the idea that they should buy a decidedly expensive database just for the sake of the few publishing eighteenth-century scholars on their faculty. But the benefits for teaching are at least as great as those for research — and if seriously exploited they can flat-out revolutionize what we do with undergraduates, not to mention graduate students.

Undergraduates mostly have to be taught out of anthology textbooks. There are virtues to decently introduced and annotated texts, but this limits what students can deal with to canonical literature and some recent extensions of the canon. Things like Pickering and Chatto facsimiles are useful tools, but they are (a) quite expensive; (b) often

badly reproduced; and (c) not searchable — and your college or university library probably has only one copy on reserve (or checked out to someone). With *ECCO*, every student has access to everything. You can get all the famous books, but you can also set your students loose to see what they can discover. They will find this a lot more exciting than just being told to read pages 448-72 of a double-column anthology for Thursday.

You can tell a class, “Go to *ECCO* and see what you can turn up about reactions to the South Sea Bubble.” Or “What can you learn about reactions to Pope’s *Dunciad*?” Or “What sorts of new tragedies were being staged in the 1730s around the time of *The London Merchant*?” (A student could search “tragedy” as a “title” in the period 1728-1732 — 77 hits. Alternatively, he or she could search the same string in “full-text” search — 814 hits. A “keyword” search yields 113 items.) Or you might ask, “What ‘sentimental comedies’ can you find in the two or three years before Goldsmith published his “*Essay on Laughing and Sentimental Comedy*?” The students are not restricted to what has been reprinted in modern times, or what is available in your Rare Book Room (if you have one, and if it welcomes undergraduates), or to someone’s selection of extracts.

You can ask your students to compare “versions.” Have them collate the first Dublin edition of “Verses on the Death of Dr Swift” against what the Norton Anthology offers (Norton eliminates Swift’s savage and highly significant footnotes). Then have them look at the first edition, published in London by Pope — a 381-line poem with



a lot of lines not to be found in the 484-line Dublin version. Invite them to investigate the 545-line Edinburgh version of 1756. Let your students discover just how drastically Congreve altered *Love for Love* in his 1710 collected works by comparing that text with the 1695 quarto (for which you will have to go to EEBO, of course). Send your students to *Pamela*. Have them compare the first edition (dated 1741) with the sixth (1742): the differences are fairly startling. *Pamela* was not a timeless and unchanging artifact chipped into stone. (Too bad there is no easy way for them to check Richardson's final, radical version, not published until 1801.) Print is not the fixed and final thing one might assume from using textbooks. I will remark in passing that my students have always fiercely resisted "reserve reading," let alone Rare Book Room reading (where they

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have to fight for access to single copies). Microfilm readings have always been considered beyond the pale. But these days I am meeting much less resistance to reading on screen: the screens have improved, and this generation of students expects to read things that way.

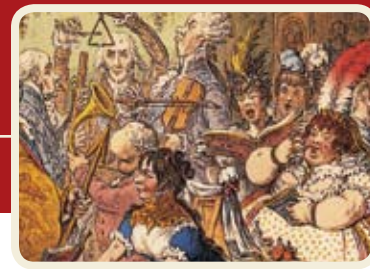
The crux for teaching is simple: you are dealing with the real thing, not "student materials." We can ask the students to try to make sense of primary sources, not just rely on textbook introductions and annotation. The difference between (1) dealing with

potted selections or what happens to be left on the library shelves come term-paper time as against (2) being able to explore massive and uncharted forests of primary sources is huge. The students tend to be a lot more interested, challenged, and energized.

Very few discoveries are made in textbooks — and the students know it.

For graduate courses the same advantages apply, cubed. For Ph.D. theses, *ECCO* again changes what is possible. Theses that previously would have required at least a year's residence in the vicinity of a major research library can now be undertaken anywhere. All the "research" advantages of *ECCO* naturally apply equally to theses. Whether the project concerns actress prosopography or satire beyond the standard canon (subjects on which I have students working at present), *ECCO* is a godsend — and it instantly changes the nature and scope of theses that a supervisor can permit students to undertake. My department uses *ECCO* as a recruitment device. Only a fool would go to a school that did not have *ECCO* if he or she intended to work in the eighteenth century.

The possibilities opened up by *ECCO* will soon be expanded by complementary databases from other sources. Adam Matthew has now made available "Eighteenth-Century Journals II" — a collection of seventy mostly obscure newspapers and magazines from *The History of the Works of the Learned* (1699-1702) to *The Oeconomist* (1798-99), drawn from the collections at the University of Texas. Even more exciting, the British Library will eventually (perhaps by the end of 2007?) mount its



digitized, electronically searchable collection of the Burney Newspapers — the biggest and best single collection of early English newspapers. If what I have heard is correct, access may be free only within the British Library itself, and as of late December 2006 no contract has yet been signed with whatever commercial company will handle the public portal. Just how expensive the Burney Newspapers will turn out to be remains a concern. Without doubt, however, the addition of this huge collection of early newspapers to the book and pamphlet texts made available by *ECCO* will give us a depth and completeness of access to the print world of the eighteenth century that no one could have imagined just a decade ago.

*ECCO* is not without annoyances and imperfections. The ESTC filming project on which it is based is still not complete — and when it is finished Gale will issue a “supplement” to *ECCO* (for an additional charge of yet undetermined magnitude). The search engine, though fast and powerful (and possessed of wonderful “fuzzy search” and “proximity search” features), has some quirks and limitations that even an experienced user may not understand. Two are especially annoying, and one of them is reportedly unfixable. Searches are conducted on a page-by-page basis, not “continuous text,” which means that if you are searching for “Covent Garden” and the two words fall on different pages, you will not get a hit. This apparently cannot be changed, annoying though the limitation is. (But if you do an “Advanced Search” with “Covent” and “Garden” as separate terms, you will get a list of all pages

on which either term is to be found — very possibly including a lot of irrelevant and unrelated occurrences of “garden.” Even if you think you are happy with your search results, you will often be well advised to try your search another way, for the results are often quite different.) Another disconcerting quirk of the *ECCO* search engine is that end-of-line hyphenation sometimes (but by no means always) stymies it. Typing “Hyde-Park” may not get you “Hyde- | Park.” Another dismaying (but in my opinion fixable) quirk is that a user cannot at present turn off the exclusion of “stop words” (or “noise words,” if you prefer that term) when conducting searches. There are times when one needs to search for exact strings that include “a” and “the” and “is” and other such words. The dire effects of being unable to force their inclusion in a search was wittily demonstrated by Sayre Greenfield in his EC/ASECS Presidential Address. Search for “To be or not to be, that is the question,” and *ECCO* will ignore every word except “question.” This creates problems. Given the cost of this database, users have a right to ask that exclusion of “stop words” be an on/off feature. One would like to be able to put text in quotation marks and feel certain that all words in the specified order would be sought. Gale also needs to improve on its very basic “Search Tips” on the *ECCO* site. The disconcerting limitations need to be made explicit, and a number of illustrations of actual searches, what they produce, and why they work (or work imperfectly) would be extremely welcome.

Two larger problems need to be bluntly stated.

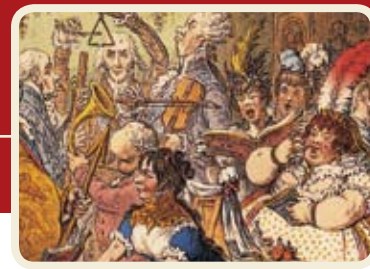


One is a straightforward matter of policy, the other more intractable. The policy question involves identification of material that should have been included and was skipped. *ECCO* is very generous in supplying large numbers of subsequent editions, but does not aim to include every edition of every book, only those that depart significantly from their predecessors. Since, however, we do not always know which editions of a book are substantively different from earlier ones, cases are going to arise in which editions that were omitted need to be added — and Gale needs to commit to doing this. The other issue is much more problematical. *ECCO* is radically dependent upon the ESTC, and the ESTC is notoriously a minefield. That the ESTC is immensely valuable is not in doubt, but given the way it was compiled, its cataloging is all too often wildly inaccurate and misleading. It depends on what is reported by contributing libraries, and library cataloguing can be disastrously wrong (and is frequently highly derivative, leading to a seeming unanimity of opinion that actually means nothing). A lot of libraries did their cataloguing by looking in the old British Museum Catalogue of Printed Books and repeating what they found there, which was not infrequently pure garbage. Attributions and dates in the ESTC are all too often simply wrong. And when this is true, *ECCO* is skating on non-existent ice.

As an instance of a queasy-making problem that arises from dependence on the ESTC, consider the case of William Egerton, *Faithful Memoirs of the Life . . . of Mrs Anne Oldfield* (London: Printed

in the Year MDCCXXXI). Search *ECCO* for this book by author and you will draw a blank. Yet *ECCO* does in fact contain the book — attributed to Edmund Curll. The ESTC says tersely “Egerton = Curll.” I have serious doubts about this. Did Curll write books? His name does not even appear as publisher. The “evidence,” so far as I can see, is an undocumented assertion in Ralph Straus’s *The Unspeakable Curll* (1927). “William Egerton” is otherwise unknown, and perhaps he is a fabrication, but we have no way to be sure. Gale needs a mechanism by which such problems can be addressed. The title should come up under “William Egerton,” and a few words of explanation of the problematical nature of the case should be included on the “Full Citation” page for this work. Any regular user of *ECCO* will find dozens of problems of this sort in short order, and something must be done about them.

As an instance of a deeply problematical text on which some annotation needs to be provided, take the “1790” edition of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. What is this thing? The title page says it presents the text of a Drury Lane production, but the cast is said to be for Covent Garden. A bit of collation shows that this is not Benjamin Victor’s 1763 adaptation (staged at Drury Lane). About half the cast appeared in the Covent Garden production of 1784, but no known performance was offered by the printed cast. This text is unconnected to either the Covent Garden production of 1808 (for which we have a promptbook) or the MS from the Drury Lane archives (British Library Add. MS 26,010[b]). There is no Larpent manuscript. This



is not the John Miller printing of 1815, said to derive from a Drury Lane production. The publisher named on the title page, R. Butters, seems never to date his books, so the ESTC treats them as [c. 1790?]. I have no idea what this book is, when it was published, or what source it comes from. And if the availability of this particular text on *ECCO* is to be of any use to anyone (as opposed to being an unexploded bibliographic landmine), then the problems and doubts need at least to be indicated in the “Full Citation.”

My point here is that Gale needs to face the rotten foundation problem. The British Library is now making the ESTC available free, and ever more scholars will be using it. Ghosts and confluences abound. A lot of discoveries will be made, and errors corrected. As the ESTC gets cleaned up, *ECCO* needs to reflect the changes. (And of course as people use *ECCO*, they will make discoveries that improve the ESTC.) I would hardly recommend treating the *ECCO* Citation Pages as a wiki site on which all comers can post their discoveries or conjectures. But to make *ECCO* what it should be — indeed, just to prevent it becoming an anachronistic embarrassment — Gale needs to set up a channel by which users can point out problems and offer improvements, which then need to be funneled through a scholarly vetting process. The results then need to appear on the Citation Pages. Gale calls *ECCO* a “product,” which from their point of view of course it is. But from our point of view it needs to be a “living” resource that grows and improves as the field advances.

Limitations and underlying problems aside, there is a simple bottom line. A university that does not have *ECCO* is not a serious player in eighteenth-century British and American studies — in literature or in anything else. Any institution giving graduate degrees in eighteenth-century subjects reduces itself to below minor-league status if it does not provide *ECCO* to its students — and is putting its publishing faculty at a crippling disadvantage.

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Teachers can — with much trouble and expense — get themselves to a research library where they can use *ECCO*, but students cannot be expected to do so. Make no mistake: from here on out, every serious scholar of the eighteenth century must find a way to get access to what *ECCO* attempts to provide — texts of all titles and powerful search capacity within them. I suspect that we have only just begun to figure out what *ECCO* can be made to do for us, though I can say right now without reservation that it has radically changed the way I work and teach. *ECCO* lets us do things we never dreamed could be done, and to do them with an efficiency hitherto inconceivable.