Horrocks, C

 Out of the Archives The Women of Punch Exhibition and Archive (Liverpool John Moores Special Collections & Archives)

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Article

Out of the Archives

The Women of Punch Exhibition & Archive (Liverpool John Moores Special Collections & Archives)

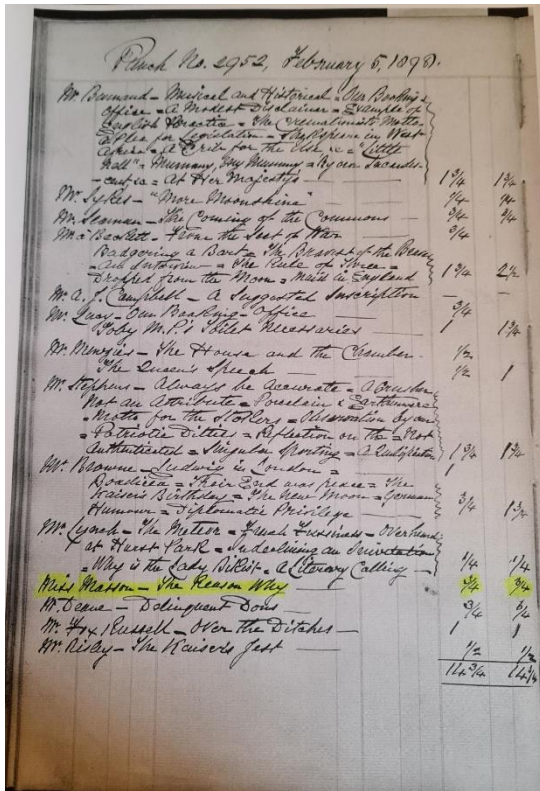**(https://www.ljmuexhibitions.online/)**

This is really the story of an Archive within an Archive, within an Archive, within another Archive! The umbrella project over all of this research is *The Punch Contributor Ledgers Project* at Liverpool John Moores University. We begin in the dusty Archives at Harrods, moving to the British Library, then into a Digital Archive and finally into *The Women of Punch Exhibition* and Archive that I will be looking at in more detail in this feature.

The original *Punch* office and Archive that I first visited, was a beautiful chaos of old books, ledgers, framed cartoons and walls of index card cabinets. On the keyword index cards, a handful of entries had contributor names pencilled next to them. As Patrick Leary has recently commented, "having found out the name of an author, the more we are able to discover about their personal, social, religious, professional and political lives, the more that information is likely to inform our understanding of the article, review, story or poem in question" "(Bringing Writers Out of the Shadows. Attribution Research and the Recovery of Identity", Jan 2023). The problem was, despite being on the cusp of a great discovery, the Archive was in the process of being sold to the British Library.

The complete Archive was transferred in 2004, the problem was that the collection remained uncatalogued for a number of years. *The Punch Archive*, now MS88937, contains almost a thousand fields. There are three 'sub-fronds', the records of *Punch*, the records of Bradbury and Evans and Bradbury, Agnew and Co., the papers of R. G. G. Price. It is not an insubstantial collection, though to date, apart from the Liverpool John Moores Contributor project, there hasn't really been a comprehensive study of the collection. There are details on finances, advertising, syndication, exhibitions and contributors. Indeed, there are also operational records from the nineteenth century as well as from the 1950s through to its final publication in 2002. As well as correspondence and records, there are original cartoons, artwork and even the original *Punch* table at which the contributors discussed the weekly issues (though this is in storage and the BL are very reluctant to bring it out!).

Post PhD I wanted to conduct a systematic analysis of the *Punch Contributor* Ledgers, winning a Curran Fellowship from the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals in 2008 to pilot a project for transcribing the first volume. The Ledgers run from 1843 to 1919 and it soon became clear I needed more funding if a full transcription of them was to be achieved. A collaborative project began with Gale Cengage in 2012 and in 2014 *The Punch Historical Archive* online was launched. I had worked closely with the team at Andover who worked on Gale Cengage's Archives and, in collaboration with Patrick Leary, strove to build a database of resources that put the user at the forefront of the platform. I, and many other colleagues, have written extensively about the challenge of having attribution data and access to periodicals behind a subscription pay wall. It was not an ideal solution, but at least the hard part of transcribing the data had been done. Patrick Leary and Gary Simons began work with LJMU to seek permission from Gale Cengage to use the basic raw attribution data and embed it within the online Curran Index. The 'sample' years were sent to Gary who worked tirelessly to embed all of the data, a job continued by the new editors Dr Lars Atkin and Dr Emily Bell.

The transcription of the Ledgers opens the gateway for a wealth of new research to be undertaken in the ever popular field of author attribution. My work with the International Centre for Victorian Women's Writing (ICVWW) at Canterbury Christchurch, under Professor Carolyn Oulton, gave me an outlet to start my work examining the first female contributor to the magazine, Mathilda Betham Edwards. The discovery of more and more female contributors began to evidence the emergence of a new 'sisterhood' of writers, previously never considered or associated with the magazine. In 2015 the *Punch Contributor Ledgers Project* launched its *Women of Punch* extended project with a keynote at the annual ICVWW event in Canterbury. My work on this new development continues with further publications on contributor Ada Leverson, culminating in *The Women of Punch Exhibition* and Archive that was launched as part of International Women's Day celebrations, 2024

In total, I have identified 136 pieces written for *Punch* by women. I wanted to create a way in which people could access these pieces, rather than having to extrapolate them from the longer table of entries in the Curran Index. In 2023 the United Nations launched their International Women's Day theme as DigitALL: Innovation and Technology for Gender Inequality (unwomen.org). One of their four calls was to "remove all barriers to access the digital world". Whilst my partnership with the Curran Index had removed some barriers to the attribution data, users still could not analyse the pieces themselves unless they had a subscription to the full Gale *Punch Historical Archive* or could find them through free online versions of the magazine, such as the HathiTrust. International Women's Day inspired me to create a resource that would bring together a list of all the women contributors alongside digital images of the pieces they had written. And so, in September 2023 *The Women of Punch* online Archive was born.

International Women's Day has been celebrated for 110 years in Britain. From 1996 each year has annual themes. The theme for 2024 was #InspireInclusion and that is what I wanted for my project. It is hoped that the material in the Archive I have created will facilitate scholars across the world to begin to identify and engage with this exciting range of voices, in order that we can incorporate their research and work into the Archive. Whilst I have identified which women were writing for the magazine, we don't know who some of those women actually were. However, other scholars working in different areas of the periodical press may have come across them and can add biographical data to the resource to enhance our understanding of who exactly was working for *Punch* at this time. In this way we are 'removing barriers' to studying the voice of the female contributor and, as IWD advocates, 'promoting the creative and artistic talent of women and girls' in a call to 'celebrate women's achievements'.

There are two ways that you can use the Archive. The first and most straightforward is to scroll to the bottom of the front page where you can "Browse the Full Collection". Alternatively, we have used four themes to group the entries, tied directly to the colours and themes of International Women's Day; the colours and themes of the WSPU suffrage party from 1908. So, those under the Purple landing card are aligned with themes of Justice and Dignity, the Green aligned with Hope and the White with Purity. As you will notice, I have added a fourth to correspond with the NUWSS party; for more detail see the Red landing card on our home page, entitled Society and Community. This may seem an arbitrary way to organise each entry, however, how the definitions of these themes have changed since the nineteenth century provides an enlightening narrative in and of itself. If a piece did not 'fit' into a theme, I have not allocated it to any section, therefore you will find a fuller list of pieces by browsing the entire catalogue of images and attributions.

So, happy browsing everyone! As I have said, an integral part of the project is beginning to understand who exactly these women were, the social and professional circles in which they mixed. This information can be invaluable in finding meaning in the pieces, identifying the allusions made. There is a Comments box where scholars can contact the project team with suggestions for attribution and to add biographical data to those already attributed but where personal details remain unknown. The additional content will be reviewed periodically and the site updated accordingly if there is sufficient supporting evidence.

**This article includes some extracts taken from my longer introductory essay to the *Punch Contributor Ledgers Project* for the Curran Index (https://www.curranindex.org/news/21/)

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