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# Archives as the prologues of information literacy

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### Andrew Whitworth

Reader, Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester. Email:

[drew.whitworth@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:drew.whitworth@manchester.ac.uk). ORCID: [0000-0002-9971-4665](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9971-4665). X: [@drewwhitworth1](https://twitter.com/drewwhitworth1).

### Abstract

Through analysing how information literate practitioners emerged in the pre-digital era, how they were taught and how they communicated their understandings of practice, we can better appreciate how these actors helped shape contemporary information landscapes. Such studies can be conducted through the resources in special collections of libraries and archives. Case studies of medieval scholarly practice, and the history of the island of St Helena, are presented as examples of where these archival sources reveal the influence of historic information (literate and illiterate) practice on modern information landscapes.

### Keywords

archives; history; information landscape; information literacy; practice

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### Introduction

This special issue celebrates the history of information literacy (IL). But the field also has a prehistory. Through analysing how information literate practitioners emerged in the pre-digital era, how they were taught and how they communicated their understandings of practice, we can better appreciate how these actors helped shape contemporary information landscapes (Lloyd, 2010). As Cook (1997) puts it: what is past is *prologue*.

Studies of past information practices and IL can be conducted through the resources in special collections of libraries and archives. Such institutions “preserve the memory of the world” (Cook, 1997, p. 18). Documents within them reflect how practitioners negotiated IL in specific social sites, and how the information landscape in that place and time “sedimented out” of these practices (Lloyd, 2010, p. 9).

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## Medieval scholarly practice

In the medieval era, book production and authorship were collaborative activities, undertaken in settings akin to communities of practice (Wenger, 1998): groups of learners in a shared domain, with shared learning needs in this domain and who develop shared repertoires of (information) practice as they try to meet these needs. Using epistolary sources (letters from monks and abbots), Long (2017) conducted a study of the medieval monastic setting, concluding that learning in these environments was a process that unfolded through social interactions, participation in shared activities, imitation and peer feedback on practice.

These settings were early versions of Zurkowski's "Reading Services Environment" and, in embryo and even prior to the spread of printing, the "Information Services industry" (1974, p. 15). They offered services which added value through collecting, compiling, organising and editing material, and "creating tools by which users can locate ... the precise information they desire promptly and easily" (Zurkowski, 1974, p. 15). Such interactions depended on a shared "grammar of legibility" (Parkes, 1991, xv) through which scribes or scholars developed new ways of organising the material they were (re)producing then deployed scriptural devices such as annotations, glosses (e.g. BL Cotton Nero D. IV, f.8) and tables of contents to communicate this *ordinatio* to fellow scholars who interacted with their work in different times and places, perhaps centuries later. The development and spread of information management techniques such as canon tables (e.g. Lambeth Palace MS 1370), allowing information in the Gospels to be cross-referenced, was accompanied by the production of 'user's guides' employed in formal educational settings. For example, a guide to using canon tables which appeared originally in the *Etymologiae* of Isidore was then included in Hugh of St Victor's *Didascalicon* (Taylor, 1961), a work that is the medieval 'library skills' textbook *par excellence* (Whitworth, 2023).

For Zurkowski, it was the transition from the pre-digital "Reading Services Environment" to the increasingly digitalised "Information Services Environment" that provoked his exhortation to the US government that it must develop the IL of the nation (1974). Similarly, the transition from the monastic, rural and ecclesiastical learning environment to the more urban and secular universities, which developed from the 11th century onwards, provoked scholars to develop these new information practices. In universities there was a need to access a wider range of information, and more quickly than had been the case in monasteries (Parkes, 1991, pp. 50–54). Echoes of this transition are still evident in the modern-day separation between IL defined as 'academic' or 'library skills', and the less formalised practices of the workplace and everyday life.

## St Helena and its archives

Archival sources are not limited to manuscripts. Insight into historic information practices can also be derived from government records; personal correspondence; minutes of meetings; accounting ledgers; diaries and journals; possibly even builders' plans and engineering schematics. What is recorded reflects what was judged relevant, whether at the time a record was made or when an archive was created to preserve the record. We "keep what we are, what we are most comfortable with, what we know ..." and simultaneously, "we are what we do *not* keep, what we consciously exclude, marginalise, ignore, destroy" (Cook, 2011, p. 174).

The British Overseas Territory of St Helena offers an example of where archives can reveal significant features and characteristics of the practice architectures within which contemporary

information practice and IL must unfold. This isolated Atlantic island has recently (October 2023) been connected to the Equiano communications cable, greatly increasing available bandwidth, with clear implications for the practices of actors including resident and emigrant Saints (St Helenians), administrators, researchers and tourists. Yet the impact of this change cannot be properly appreciated without considering the centuries of practice which have preceded it, and how this history has shaped the island's contemporary information landscapes.

Since the granting of the island to the East India Company (EIC) in 1673, there are detailed records available of many aspects of life on St Helena, held in archives including government records (the National Archives in London and St Helena Government records in Jamestown); corporate archives including those of the EIC and Cable & Wireless; and the archives of individuals, whether held privately or in repositories such as the British or Bodleian libraries (see References; Day, 1997). These sources record how information about St Helena has been generated; how this information has formed knowledge on, and about, the island; and how various technologies and media have been used to communicate these understandings. Historical studies of these archival sources have been undertaken, whether focusing on St Helena specifically (Schulenberg, 1999) or significant related actors such as the EIC (Winterbottom, 2010): but these have tended to study the *texts*, rather than the practices that have produced them, and the architectures that shape them.

Examples of the information literate practice of key historical actors can be found in archived copies of the *St Helena Monthly Register*, the island's first printed journal (British Library: see Archival sources notes). St Helena's first printing press was installed in 1806. In 1808, Alexander Beatson became Governor, a role that entailed being both the diplomatic authority and EIC corporate manager of this valuable way station. Beatson "seized on the press as the means of disseminating his views on agricultural development" (Kitching, 1936, p. 1). This was not done through pronouncement backed up with propaganda, as the press might be used by a modern politician. As communication with his EIC superiors could move no faster than a ship, Beatson was obliged to generate knowledge on his own account, and use available media to communicate the results of his investigations.

He fulfilled these tasks in a highly information literate fashion. For example, in the December 1811 *Register*, Beatson writes the lead article: "On Clearing Lands of Grubs." He sets this desired learning outcome in the local context, and describes methods and sources in detail (Beatson, 1811, p. 1):

The suggestions of an anonymous Writer, for clearing land of Grubs, which appeared in the Register for February last, have induced me to try the effect of what is recommended, by a set of experiments .... With this view, I prepared four large Boxes ... in such a manner that the Grubs could not escape. These boxes, placed in the open air, were nearly filled with soil, taken from a field lately broken up, where those insects abounded ...

After nine pages of methods and results (in a journal printed for public consumption), Beatson offers conclusions regarding planting schedules and pest control using hot rollers. This is a colonial Governor taking not just his ceremonial, but his economic and environmental management responsibilities seriously.

Yet on other occasions, poor information practice blocked the ability of actors to learn about the island, and the community's ability to learn about itself. Cook observes that archives are not just a place for collective remembering, but potentially, collective forgetting. Archival memory is political: "since ancient times, those in power decided who was allowed to speak and who was forced into silence, both in public life and in archival records" (Cook, 1997, p. 18). *Whose information practices have shaped the archive? Whose voices are heard, and from where are they speaking?*

Throughout St Helena's history, a great deal of information has been removed from the island (Kitching, 1947, p. 9), and even what has been preserved in the UK is still largely inaccessible to Saints. Many EIC records were destroyed when the Crown took over in 1836 (Kitching, 1947, p. 10), and many records pertinent to Napoleon's captivity on St Helena were never kept there in the first place (Kitching, 1947, p. 11). Historian and information agent Trevor Hearl, whose archive of correspondence, now in the Bodleian, is one of the most expansive sources of information regarding St Helena, frequently bemoaned the lack of information produced on the island by Saints: until the 1970s, virtually nothing had been published locally (MSS Atlan. s.23/41). Most of all, the former slave population, the most peripheral group of all, are absent from the archive: their existence in the present information landscape reduced mainly to entries in ledgers — many pages of EIC accounts list each household's holdings of 'Blacks and Cattle' — and skeletons in the ground (St Helena Island Info, 2022).

And just because records are kept, this does not mean contemporary actors made effective use of the information therein. Throughout its history, observers (Gosse, 1938; Wass, 2015) have noted a chronic lack of *institutional memory* on St Helena. It is telling to contrast the practices of the modern administration with Beatson's:

The current Governor ... was not made aware of the previous reports into child safety prepared on St Helena until after he assumed office in 2011 .... There is a lack of continuity when managers are replaced. There is a failure of overlap or handovers or a failure to create best practice manuals to ensure that incomers learn from past experience and benefit from prior reports. (Wass, 2015, 1.48)

Wass notes that the typical gubernatorial information practice is now to refer *all* problematic issues back to Whitehall (2015, 1.103); as a result, decisions can take months, just as in the maritime past. Hearl's frustrations with how these delays nearly forced the scrapping of a non-contentious publication — a hiking guide to St Helena (Mathieson & Carter, 1993) — are evident in a letter sent by him to the Chief Secretary of the St Helena government on 3 June 1994 (MSS Atlan. s.23/27).

What is significant for the contemporary situation is that these ineffective practices should not be attributed to the island's disconnection from global information flows. The Cable & Wireless and National Archives reveal how St Helena, technologically, has not always been peripheral. When the Boer War began in October 1899, the Admiralty expressed immediate concerns that the existing cable route, through Angola, was "not wholly British" (DOC/CW/12/109) and vulnerable to sabotage. Within weeks, St Helena was connected to Cape Town via an undersea telegraph cable that continued to Europe (DOC/TCM/3/29). In the 1960s the secretive 'Diplomatic Wireless Services' spied from St Helena on communications in Africa (CAB 21/5416). Currently it is Ascension Island, 800 miles from St Helena, that has become the south Atlantic's information hub. Nominally a dependency of St Helena, in reality this is an

independent corporate fief (DOC/CW/9/66), and Whitehall has made a point, in the past, of removing references to Ascension from public communications (FCO 58/500) to keep it “remote from the public eye” (CO 1024/565).

Thus, there is evidence that previous investments in the information infrastructure of St Helena and its dependencies have not, and were never intended to, enhance the information practice of Saints themselves, or even of the local administration. Assessments of how the island’s formal and informal educational and learning systems might affect IL on, and around, St Helena, therefore cannot be properly made without understanding how these processes will not emerge afresh around Equiano, but must, unavoidably, build on information behaviours, cognitive schema (or discursive maps: Harvey, 1996; Whitworth, 2020) and other features of this social setting that are now hundreds of years old.

## Conclusion

Though he named it, IL did not emerge only after Zurkowski (1974); nor is it a purely contemporary phenomenon, relevant only to the current generation. The forms IL takes in a modern university are, in part, shaped by scholarly practice as it emerged hundreds of years ago. IL on St Helena has been, and will continue to be, shaped by an information landscape with multiple layers that reflect decisions about the relevance of information and practice made over at least four centuries.

The examples above are Eurocentric, but valuable scholarly work could be done to explore the prehistory of information literate practice in non-European contexts, including through texts produced by Arab, Hindu and East Asian civilisations. Institutions such as the British Library, including through its Endangered Archives Project (which has recently digitised the EIC records that remain on St Helena), are placing increasing numbers of medieval manuscripts and other documents online, making these sources much more accessible. It is hoped that this short article, along with Whitworth (2023), might inspire IL scholars to study these neglected resources.

## Declarations

### Ethics approval

Ethical review was not considered necessary in alignment with the University of Manchester’s guidance on the conduct of ethical research.

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Visits to the referenced archives were supported by personal research allowances from the Manchester Institute of Education at the University of Manchester.

### AI-generated content

No AI tools were used.

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