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The Imperial Archive: Creating Online Research Resources

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The Imperial Archive

Creating Online Research Resources

In this article the authors – a lecturer in English and a postgraduate student – describe an innovative web project designed to create and maintain an expanding set of online research resources, as part of an assessed MA module in English.

Conception

'The Imperial Archive' (<http://www.qub.ac.uk/english/imperial/imperial.htm>) is a web project which forms an integral part of the 'Literature, Imperialism, Post-Colonialism' module, taught in the MA in Modern Literary Studies at Queen's University. Over a period of twelve weeks students examine texts and issues reflecting the influence of the British imperial process on literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Using colonial discourse and post-colonial theory, the module first examines the British idea of 'Empire' and the colonial enterprise in nineteenth-century fiction, and then proceeds to look at twentieth-century texts – some of which 'write back' to their predecessors – in an attempt to understand how imperialism continues to affect literary production in Britain's former colonies. The textual pairings include Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (representing Australia); Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (the Caribbean); and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, alongside Chinua Achebe's *African Trilogy* (Nigeria). The comparisons are supported theoretically by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995).

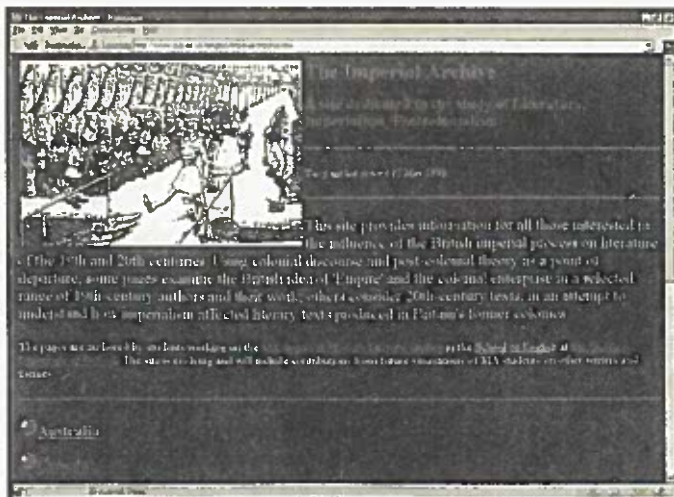


Fig. 1. The Imperial Archive at <http://www.qub.ac.uk/english/imperial/imperial.htm>

In many ways the assessment methods used are readily recognisable: each student writes an assessed essay (75%) and gives an oral presentation (10%). The remainder (15%) is applied to the web project, which combines traditional and innovative methodologies

to produce an exciting research resource. 'The Imperial Archive' (which presently includes contributions from two generations of students) reflects the work on texts, in that it focuses on the same six geographical regions: Australia, India, Ireland, Nigeria, Canada, and the Caribbean (see fig. 1).

The first group of contributors (who gave the project its impetus and the pages their initial direction) were instructed to organise their material into six categories:

- an overview of literary and cultural expression in the colonial period
- textual examples from the colonial period
- an overview of literary and cultural expression in the post-colonial period
- textual examples from the post-colonial period
- annotated bibliography (consisting of items students read in the course of their research)
- related Web sites

Such a scheme – while seeming initially restrictive – paralleled the content of the module; also, the precise guidelines gave students some parameters within which to work. In the first year of operation, each person took responsibility for one geographical region. This division of labour fostered a sense of coherence for each set of pages, and encouraged their originators to acquire a sense of expertise or 'ownership' over a particular set of resources. A good example of integration, with a clearly defined identity, is the section on the Caribbean, to which the author gave the name 'Christophine' – a character in Jean Rhys's novel (fig. 2).

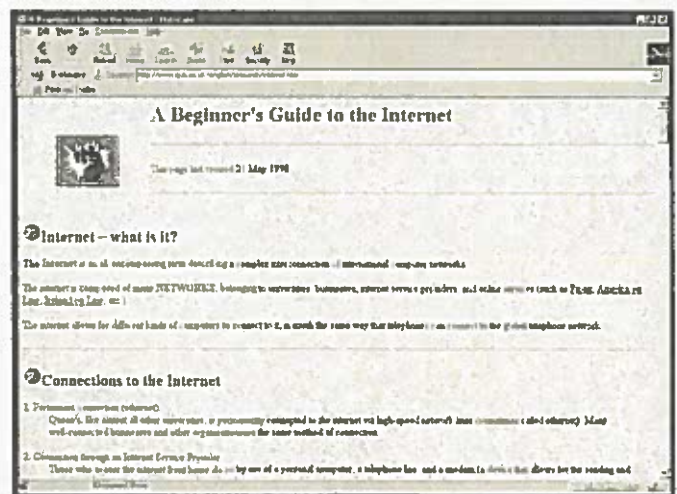


Fig. 2. The Caribbean, one of six regions covered by the Imperial Archive.

The next generation of students (six in number, who completed their work in June 1998) had somewhat greater flexibility. They were asked to build on the work of their predecessors in several ways. They were invited to amend, where appropriate, existing pages – in particular to add to the bibliographies and lists of related Web sites. They were also asked to write a minimum of three pages, in the form of short essays, on particular topics which interested them, as well as to suggest amendments to the home pages for each region, in order to allow for the accommodation of their interests in the overall plan for the site. Students were also encouraged to include images, which might serve as an added attraction for particular pages.

These second-generation contributions differed from those of the original architects. Students who were particularly enthusiastic about the project went well beyond the suggested minimum, and produced up to eight pages of new material – in some cases treating more than one geographical region. Occasionally an existing debate was taken in a new direction: for example, the initial emphasis of the Canadian pages was on representations of 'the Native'; this was subsequently changed, to allow for a discussion of Douglas Coupland's *Generation X*, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. The Irish pages also provided opportunities for innovation and expansion: a class visit to University College Dublin, for a seminar with post-colonial critic Declan Kiberd (author of the stimulating and controversial *Inventing Ireland*) gave two enterprising students the chance to conduct a taped interview, and create a page which featured their questions, followed by Kiberd's responses in the form of sound files (<http://www.qub.ac.uk/english/imperial/ireland/kiberd.htm>). Such examples demonstrate how, after two years of operation, the Imperial Archive represents an exciting set of expanding resources, featuring ideas and input generated by postgraduates themselves, who continue to define the overall shape of the project.

Implementation

Because the module is only twelve weeks in duration, it is impossible to give students the necessary facility with HTML to allow them to produce web pages independently. Humanities departments at UK universities are not yet at the stage where they can expect to receive students with a full complement of IT skills. Some – though not all – entrants have experience of word processors; only a small number are familiar with web browsing, or the searching of online resources beyond the local library catalogue. IT training courses for postgraduates do exist at Queen's. However, with demands on students' time increasing, there is little incentive to engage in activities which do not contribute directly to successful completion of the degree programme. The School of English at Queen's recognises that training is advantageous, and compels all incoming MAs to

take a research methods module, which offers instruction on preparing and presenting a piece of scholarly writing; direction in the use of databases for accessing information relevant to research; technical information about the production and transmission of texts that may influence students' assessment of literary evidence and intentionality. One session, on 'The Use of Computers in Literary Research', is complemented by an online 'Beginner's Guide to the Internet'; but such limited exposure provides foothold rather than a stable platform.

The above considerations and restraints lead to the conclusion that at present, the lowest common denominator to be expected of humanities students is word processing. If the use of popular packages like Microsoft Word for Windows (the recommended one at Queen's) has not been mastered before arriving, it is feasible for students to acquire the necessary expertise within a few weeks. The fact that 'Literature, Imperialism, Post-Colonialism' is a second-semester module is an advantage: those who are enrolled have ample opportunity in the first semester – in preparing essays and projects – to acquire the necessary skills.

Instead of editing in HTML, students prepare the documents which they wish to place on the web in word-processed format (fig. 3), compiling them in Word, Word Perfect, or Ami Pro; they can also present material in Rich Text Format, or as plain text files. These are sent as email attachments to the supervisor. Then, using HoTMetal Pro 4.0, these documents are converted for them into HTML, placed in a template, and then minimally edited as appropriate. The editing is necessary for reasons of presentation: conversion through the use of filters does not necessarily result in correctly formatted documents. For example, lines of poetry appear as separate paragraph elements, rather than as blockquotes with breaks, heading levels often need to be adjusted; various types of list (ordered, unordered, and definition) frequently need to be manually formatted; tables also require some modification. It will be appreciated that with this strategy, the alterations are made to enhance clarity,

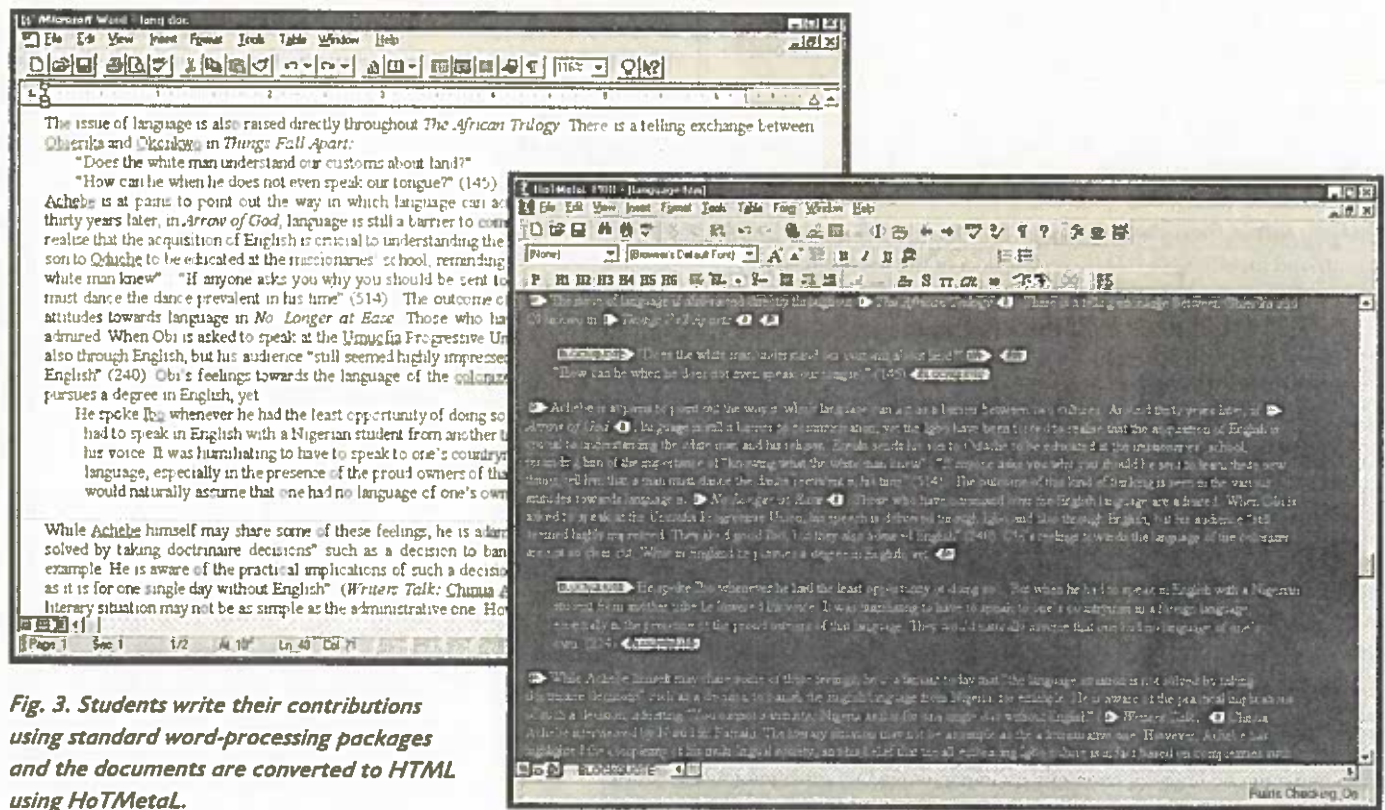


Fig. 3. Students write their contributions using standard word-processing packages and the documents are converted to HTML using HoTMetal.

rather than to interfere with the points or arguments students wish to make in their work.

The deadline for submitting the word-processed files is the last teaching day of the semester. By this point students have received a good deal of support in developing clear, concise documents – which in most cases resemble short research papers. They consult with the supervisor concerning the expectations involved in presenting information on the web. They are also informed of possible strategies for writing these short pieces, each of which makes its point in 1,000 or so words. They confer about their contributions, and occasionally – as in the case of the Declan Kiberd interview referred to above – work together to develop ideas. The documents which are presented are generally thoughtful, informed, politically astute, and the product of weeks of research, involving textual material, online resources, and occasionally interviews or other personal contact with writers and critics.

Students' work is uploaded to the web server in as raw a state as practicable. The template used for these pages adds a creation date; a mailto scheme for each student; a background image or colour; hyperlinks to the Queen's University home page, the School of English home page (called 'Prometheus'), and the 'Imperial Archive' home page. Each student-generated page also carries a statement, which reads:

This project was completed under the direction of Dr Leon Litvack as a requirement for the MA degree in Modern Literary Studies in the School of English at the Queen's University of Belfast. The site is evolving and will include contributions from future generations of MA students on other writers and themes.

This imprimatur acts as a form of 'quality assurance', informing the reader that the pages form part of a larger student-led project and university degree programme, and that they have been scrutinised by members of academic staff. The email addresses can be updated after students have left the university, thus encouraging them to feel that their contributions form part of an ongoing critical debate, to which they can, if they choose, contribute – even after they have entered other walks of life.

Assessment

In order to be judiciously assessed, the work must be that of the student, rather than that of the supervisor. For this reason, web design and facility with HTML are not part of the marking criteria. It should also be noted that this material – as with all other module components which contribute to the overall mark – is scrutinised by the three or four internal examiners who comprise the Modern Literary Studies teaching team, and by the external examiner. In the first year of operation, 10% of the module mark was dedicated to the web project; in the second this was raised to 15%, to recognise and reward the amount of effort put into the scheme by students. It should also be noted that there are different levels of IT expertise amongst the markers in the School of English at Queen's (a reality at virtually all humanities departments in the UK); while all members of staff have some computer skills, there is no guarantee that they possess a technical awareness of how HTML, web pages, and browsers work – or indeed of the potentials and pitfalls of this medium. After careful deliberation the examiners concluded that the criteria should reflect what all university teachers of English can assess effectively – that is, the features which would be expected to

be found in written essays. These include

- relevance
- knowledge
- analysis
- argument and structure
- originality
- presentation.

These criteria provide teachers of English with readily identifiable touchstones, in essays of the type which students of English have been accustomed to write in their undergraduate and postgraduate careers. These established points also provide students with a clear idea of what is expected, and ensure that the goals are achievable. In essence, any student who can produce a word-processed essay should be able to conceive of a short argument which would work well as a stand-alone web page.

Because the requirements of the project ask students to update existing pages – as in the case of an annotated bibliography – certain temporary measures must be employed in order to facilitate such contributions. When these bibliographies are submitted, they are added to existing HTML documents as separate sections, appropriately bookmarked to distinguish (for assessment purposes) the efforts of a new generation of students. After the assessment process is complete, these pages are edited to integrate the items cited into the general body of the bibliography. The signature and mailto schemes at the bottom of the page are also adjusted, to reflect the joint contribution. In this way individual efforts can be delineated in formulating a distinct mark for each student contribution.

The question of jointly conceived pages, or pages employing multimedia – as in the case of the Kiberd interview – is somewhat more complicated. Students should receive some recognition for taking the initiative to interview such an important post-colonial critic, and for formulating the questions posed; but because the resulting web page involves a degree of manipulation which is beyond their current capabilities – transferring material from digital audio tapes to sound recording software, editing individual sound files to an appropriate length so that they may be effectively downloaded to a local machine, inserting an anchor pointing to a sound file in the HTML document – the level of student contribution is diminished: the 'raw' effort is transformed through the intervention of the supervisor. At present such a page can be viewed by the examiners as contributing marginally to the overall impression of a candidate's performance, which is primarily based on the assessment of the short essay contributions. Nevertheless such pages are essential to the viability of 'The Imperial Archive' as a research resource.

By the time of the examiners' meeting, all markers are expected to have reviewed the material online, in order to appreciate the nature of the medium, and to observe how students' contributions accord with the overall conception of the site. Mindful of the six criteria, they assess individual contributions as a 'package', and assign to each student a single agreed mark, based on the 17-point University mark scheme of conceptual equivalents and percentage grades, ranging from a 'high/excellent first' at 90%, through a 'definite/solid II.1' at 65%, down to 'nothing of merit' at zero. This mark is then converted to a score out of 15, to arrive at the final grade.

This discussion has made clear that the driving force behind this web project is the supervisor, who has the necessary facility with HTML. Students provide the primary input; but the design capabilities of their teacher is the key factor in transforming the resources from a set of short, word-processed essays into published online documents forming part of a research archive which is the first of its kind in the British Isles. Because of the time and effort needed to complete the various processes herein described, this project works best with small numbers. The success of 'The Imperial Archive' depends upon close cooperation between the various parties both within and without the classroom. The model suggested here for teaching, research, and assessment may be easily adapted to other situations, to produce equally interesting material, which conforms to the exigencies of the World Wide Web. 'The Imperial Archive' is, in the final analysis:

- global
- interactive
- cross-platform
- graphical
- distributed (the information is spread all over the world)
- dynamic (information can be constantly updated)
- hypertextual.

The Student Perspective – (Nicholas Dunlop)

As one of the initial contributors to 'The Imperial Archive', I was required to undertake this unique form of assessed work with no preconceptions and, more worryingly, no blueprint from which to work. At first, this caused me some concern. The gap between the traditional undergraduate essay and this project (encompassing literary and theoretical analyses, historical material, a research element in the form of an annotated bibliography, and a familiarity with on-line resources in the field of post-colonialism) appeared disconcertingly wide.

Bridging this gap proved less difficult than feared, however, and in doing so, several benefits emerged. The need to keep each page

short and succinct sharpened my critical skills. The treatment of each brief essay (whether analytical or historical) as an introduction to complex material required a comprehensive understanding of the issues involved. Also, the project encouraged me to investigate those aspects of a country's culture and politics which were central to post-colonial literary theory.

Having no choice but to become IT-literate in order to search the Web, I (an unreconstructed technophobe at the outset) soon came to realise the value of this technology in terms of facilitating research. In searching for related Web sites and titles of critical works in databases, I became comfortable with technology which, to me at least, initially seemed intimidating. With a little patience, a wealth of useful material can be accessed online.

The continued expansion of the Archive is central to its usefulness as an online research resource. Although I have completed the module, I have continued to contribute – most notably a comprehensive bibliography on the works of Australian author Peter Carey (fig. 4). I have attached links to this from many other sites which specialise in Australian and post-colonial literature, and hope that it will be used by other Carey scholars worldwide; an email link also offers a contact point for discussion. As I am soon to progress to doctoral research on Carey and David Malouf, such interaction should prove an invaluable aid to my work. My participation in creating the Archive stirred my interest in post-colonial literature, to the extent that I intend to make this area the focus of my academic future. What began as an assessed project has since become a foundation for my own research, and hopefully a useful tool for others who wish to know more about this burgeoning research area.

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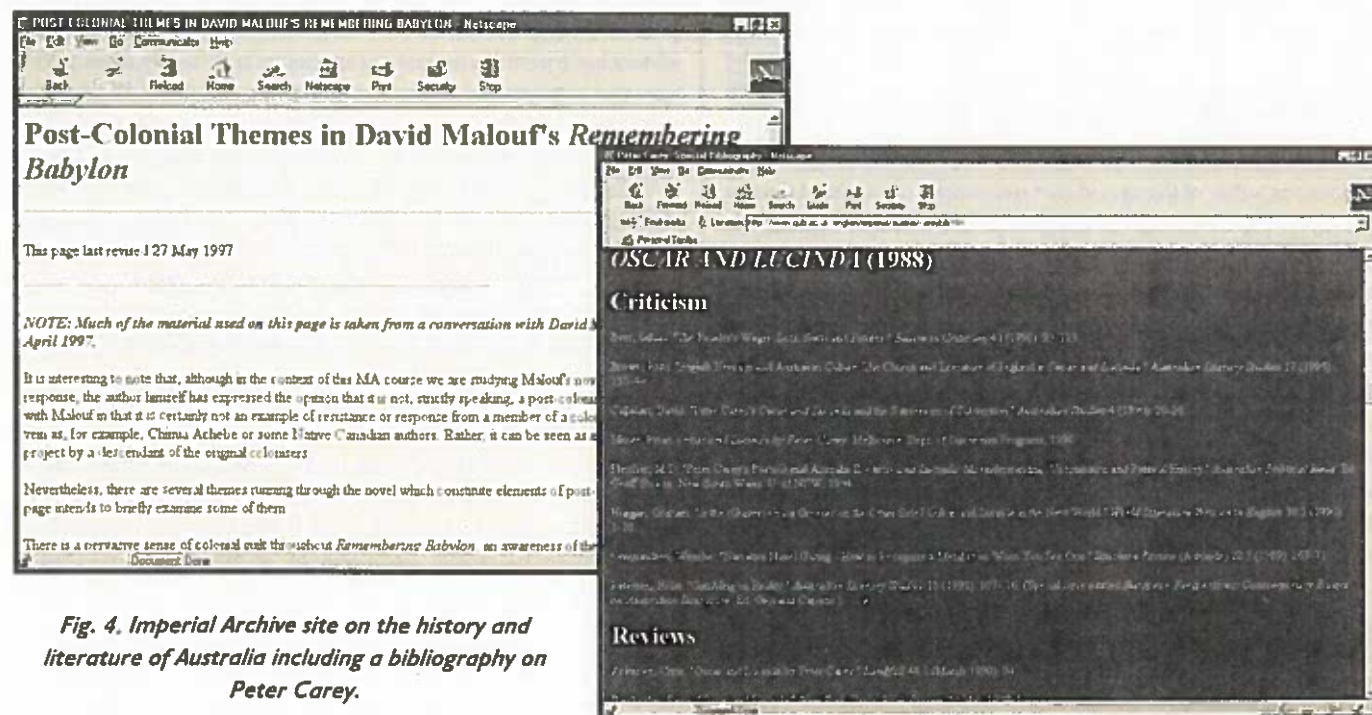


Fig. 4. Imperial Archive site on the history and literature of Australia including a bibliography on Peter Carey.

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OXFORD TEXT ARCHIVE

Editorial

As the vast majority of our readers will be aware the higher education funding bodies undertook a detailed review of the CTI and the TLTSN during 1998 (see <http://www.cti.ac.uk/news/features/review.html>). Building on the overall success of the CTI, the HE funding bodies are to establish a new programme of Subject Centres with a broader remit for teaching & learning. Our Centre, together with other organisations, made a response to the consultation document published by the funding bodies. In our response we were particularly concerned to ensure that the grouping of subject areas to be supported by the new Subject Centres would best serve the diverse and interdisciplinary nature of the humanities. The formation of new Subject Centres, together with the recent JISC call for subject gateways, provides excellent opportunities for more formal collaboration between, and coordination of, subject-based services, particularly within the humanities.

Sarah Porter has left the CTI Centre to become coordinator of the HCU's Humanities Computing Development Team, a new service to assist Oxford's humanities staff to develop teaching and research applications. Sophie Clarke, our half-time Project Assistant, accepted the post of IT support officer for the Faculty of Literae Humaniores in Oxford. We were sad to lose two very effective members of staff from the Centre though pleased that both have gone on to better positions and continue to work within humanities computing in Oxford.

We are pleased to welcome Dr Frances Condron as the Centre's new full-time Project Officer. Frances comes to us from the AHDS Archaeology Data Service in York. Her teaching and research background is in classics and archaeology. Frances will be the main contact in Oxford for the TLTP ASTER Project (Assisting Small-group Teaching through Electronic Resources) of which Oxford is a partner.

The Centre will have its full complement of staff with the arrival of Stuart Sutherland in February as the Centre's Information Officer. Stuart is currently a lecturer in English and Media Studies at Cadbury College, Birmingham. He will have particular responsibility for the Centre's publishing activities.

We would be grateful if our readers could complete one or both of the enclosed questionnaires, especially if you have ever made use of the Oxford Text Archive's services. Further information about the computer-assisted assessment project can be found on page 34.

Please contact us if you would like to submit an article for the last issues of Computers & Texts to be published by the CTI Centre. We are planning a special issue to mark the completion of over ten years service as part of the CTI.

(MF)

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