A MODERN BANNATYNE

DIGITAL HUMANITIES SPECIAL FEATURE

Lucy Hinnie, University of Saskatchewan

ABSTRACT

This essay introduces the Bannatyne Manuscript as an historical and literary artefact and describes the process through which it is being digitized. The importance of this project lies in its goal of making this important manuscript more easily accessible. In addition to discussing the method behind the manuscript’s digitization, it also examines issues related to the creation of digital editions more broadly while examining the editorial process behind the manuscript’s creation by George Bannatyne.

Keywords: Scotland; Bannatyne Manuscript; Scottish literature; Scottish verse; digital humanities; digitization; digital edition

The Bannatyne manuscript (c. 1568) is a crucial artefact for the study of Older Scots literature and late-medieval Scottish history. The manuscript is currently held in the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh as Adv MS 1.1.6. The Catalogue of English Literary Manuscripts describes it as:

A formal anthology of Scottish poetry, including 51 poems presently attributed to William Dunbar, largely in a single secretary hand, with a few later additions in other hands, in two tall folio volumes, with differing series of pagination and foliation, vol. I comprising 192 leaves (paginated 1–385), vol. II
comprising 205 leaves (paginated 387–795), all leaves now mounted separately in window mounts, each volume in 19th-century green morocco elaborately gilt.\(^1\)

These leaves are divided into thematic sections – theology, morality, comedy, love and fables. The manuscript was compiled by George Bannatyne, a young man of high Edinburgh society, during an outbreak of plague ‘quhen we fra work were compeld to rest’ (when we from work were compelled to rest). The manuscript holds a great deal of literature that may otherwise have been lost. It is the sole source for a number of poems such as ‘the Wyf of Auchtermuchty’ and an authoritative witness for poems by William Dunbar, Robert Henryson, Gavin Douglas and, particularly in the fourth section, Alexander Scott.

It is time to bring this manuscript up to date by producing a functional digital edition. My postdoctoral project is entitled “Digitising the Bannatyne MS c. 1568,” but this title is misleading. Having received funding from the Leverhulme Trust, the first iteration of this project running to January 2021 will digitize the fourth section of the manuscript, ‘love’.\(^2\) This paper outlines the process of theorizing and conceptualizing this project, as well as providing an overview of the technology and principles used in bringing the text into the twenty-first century. The key focuses of this project are accessibility and facilitating understanding, not only of the content of the


\(^{2}\) Please note that all images of the manuscript itself within the project come from the National Library of Scotland’s IIIF image, under a Creative Commons 4.0 license at http://bit.ly/38qzUyN. This project is built on the principles of creative commons, specifically the idea of share and share alike, and remixing content to mutual benefit.
manuscript, but of the unique qualities of Bannatyne’s own editorial process, and his rudimentary ‘information technology’.

PHILOSOPHY OF THE PROJECT

The reality of the present moment is multiply troubling, especially for an early-career researcher. Digital humanities promises much in terms of opening up scholarship. However, the possibility of longstanding and enduring work is tied up in the mire of problems which plague the academy: the precarity of scholars in academic positions, the paucity of funding for large scale projects and the expense of maintaining and producing a viable product. Much of the appeal of digital humanities is the threat it poses to traditional systems of academic authority: removing knowledge from the traditional ivory tower and placing it into the hands of the user. On a practical level, the idea of a project as a ‘standalone’ entity that can be compartmentalized is appealing in maintaining independence and accessibility.3 To this end I have made some considered decisions in how to make this project something that can be self-contained and travel with me, wherever this path leads.

BANNATYNE AND HIS TEXT

George Bannatyne himself looms large as a contributor to this project. At various points I have designated Bannatyne a compiler, an author, an anthologist. I believe now that editor is the best term for his practice – in categorizing his anthology so meticulously, so much so that it was arguably suitable for

3 For an informative and intersectional overview of issues facing the field at present, please see Dorothy Kim and Jesse Stommel, eds. *Disrupting the Digital Humanities* (Santa Barbara: Punctum Books, 2018).
print,⁴ Bannatyne places himself ahead of his time in terms of organizing and quantifying information. His system of numbering and distinctive efforts to group poems thematically, not only as the five sections, but as groups within those larger divisions, indicate an understanding and processing of information that is in many senses a binary or digital process. In conversation with Professor David Parkinson we mooted the idea of Bannatyne as the original information technologist for Scottish literature. So many projects start with the sifting of wheat from chaff, decisions regarding the content and purpose of the collection – unusually, many of these questions have already been dealt with by Bannatyne in his process. In this very real sense, the remit of the digitisation becomes editing an editor.

EDITIONS

A problem that has plagued the manuscript as an entity in and of itself is the siphoning of anonymized verse and the streamlining of ‘big names’ into smaller collections. That is not to say that the end results have been lacking, but it has proven to me the need to approach the manuscript as a corpus, an entity of cohesion despite its enormity. Just as Bannatyne’s original act of anthologizing is rooted in a need to preserve a canon, so too is this act of digitisation an act which will preserve the enormity as well as the specificity of the collection. As regards extant editions of the text, the Scottish Text Society edition (1928-1934), edited by William Tod Ritchie in the interwar years is, to my eye, the most authoritative and detailed edition of the text to date. This edition has stood scholars in good stead, and its replication in .pdf format on the NLS website is a crucial

resource,\textsuperscript{5} despite the limitations of the search functions on individual pdf pages. The introduction of new International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF) images of the manuscript in January 2019 was exceptionally well timed.\textsuperscript{6} The IIIF offers a repository of high quality images, ‘collaboratively produc[ing] an interoperable technology and community framework for image delivery’.\textsuperscript{7} The core of this digitisation is a fresh transcription of the text, which will add to the utility of these images and is valuable in myriad other ways: it draws focus towards the content of the manuscript, rather than its codicology, which opens up the potential for new scholarship, and shedding light onto a manuscript that is often skirted around.

This is not the first time that the Bannatyne has been approached in a digital framework. Curiously, the Oxford Text Archive (OTA), a large corpus of electronic texts based at the University of Oxford, has a rudimentary COCOA encoded transcription of the Manuscript. COCOA is an early format of text encoding dating from the 1960s and rarely used now. According to the OTA, although the most recent documentation regarding the Bannatyne file dates from the late 1980s and early 90s, the original “notes for instructing operator” were written in 1964. This makes the Bannatyne one of the very oldest texts in the archive.\textsuperscript{8} This file was used to create a concordance of the text, which was integral in the


\textsuperscript{8} My thanks to Martin Wynne of the Oxford Text Archive for access to these files and his sound advice regarding the history of the Bannatyne.
making of the Dictionary of the Older Scots Tongue, now known as the Dictionary of the Scots Language (DSL). 9

TECHNOLOGY

Simplicity and accessibility has been the key consideration in establishing the framework for this project and its lifespan. The Textual Encoding Initiative (TEI) has had a bad press over the years; yet having a grasp of this technique and the opportunity it affords the Bannatyne is crucial. Dr Peter Robinson’s Textual Communities project, based in part on a customized TEI schema, was pivotal in showing me the potential as a basis for progressive digitizing work. 10 TEI is a diplomatic, objective system of tagging values and allowing for multiple displays of the same core text. It is something that has endured over the years, which allows for both editor and reader to benefit. It is text based and most of all, is something which chimes with Bannatyne’s own praxis, and his focus on thematic engagement and guidance for the reader. In viewing my own project as a descendant of the work done by Bannatyne, Ramsay and Ritchie, I feel that this is a project which has natural roots which grow and entwine in numerous interesting ways. It is, in many ways, a living text.

I have taken further practical steps to work towards a goal of collaborative self-sufficiency: acquiring an institution-neutral domain name, using open access technology at ever practicable juncture [a list of specific resources is located at the web address provided below]. 11 I have further utilized open-access models for website creation, sharing code with fellow

11 http://bit.ly/2We8vdz
digital humanists, such as Dr. Robyn Pritzker (Edinburgh), Camille Villa (Stanford), and Lisa Baer-Tsarfati (Guelph). IIIF images have been incorporated with a rudimentary link to Universal Viewer. Collaborative participation has been implemented where possible: thus far limited to a focus group, and supervisor input, and aided by my undergraduate collaborator, Tiana Kirstein, who has worked hard with the existing COCOA files and new transcriptions. In the spirit of collaboration and interdisciplinarity, I ran an online focus group over the summer of 2019 to establish a sense of the utility of a digitisation. Nine participants from a cross-section of Older Scots and manuscript studies participated, with varying degrees of familiarity with digital humanities. A digest of findings can be viewed at the link below.¹²

CONCLUSION

The idea of taking these practices and expanding them beyond the fourth section, depends on collaboration and common goals. The past year at the University of Saskatchewan, in collaboration with the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, has allowed me to envisage a future for this project that encompasses a pedagogical approach, a community of scholarship and an entity which offers utility to those who need it most, free of access and simple to use. This is a timely interjection for the field of Older Scottish literature, and I look forward to sharing more in due course.