

# 21 Database in Theory and Practice: The Bibliography of Irish Literary Criticism

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## Abstract

Focusing on *The Bibliography of Irish Literary Criticism* (BILC, 2010), a bibliographical database of Irish literary criticism developed by humanities and information and communications technology (ICT) researchers in NUI Maynooth, this chapter investigates the opportunities and implications afforded the field of Irish literary studies emerging from and enabled by electronic advances. Unlike earlier accounts of database technology that have emerged from the humanities community (Dimock, 2007; Folsom, 2007), this chapter provides a more practical and more critical account of the new medium. It is argued that while the relational structure of databases such as BILC, combined with appropriate interface design, can yield interesting insights into Ireland's literary history, "the optimism and the excitement about new possibilities for rethinking the texts, canon, and creation" offered by digital resources such as BILC are "ahead of the actual development work" (Dalbello, 2011, p. 496). However, following McGill (2007), it is further argued that an engagement with the BILC database affords an opportunity to identify potential areas for development in resources of this kind. Building on observations made throughout, the chapter concludes with a discussion of how increased attention to issues regarding dissemination and sustainability are vital for ensuring the potency and ongoing viability of digital databases designed for use in humanities scholarship.

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**Keywords:** Irish studies, database, historiography, Colin Graham, sustainability, dissemination.

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## 1. Database technology and Irish literary studies

Commenting on the relationship between humanities scholarship and digital technology, McGann (2008) provided the following forecast:

“All around us information technology is moving from paper to digital forms. For humanists, while the need to consult original materials will always remain, our research and scholarly intercourse will soon be carried out primarily in digital media. Our depositories, finding aids, analytic tools, and publishing venues will all be digitally designed and integrated” (p. 80).

In the field of Irish literary scholarship, this move from print to digital forms of knowledge production and dissemination has accelerated in recent years, when an increasing number of projects is being produced in digital form. Yet as Kelleher (2011) has observed,

“we have yet to examine fully the role of material objects (texts, compilations, compendia) in structuring our access to information and knowledge, and their changing role in light of the new possibilities offered by the digital and the virtual” (p. 12).

Subsequently, important epistemological questions regarding the achievements of these resources have remained unaddressed. Relatedly, in the absence of engaged scholarly critique, we have yet to acknowledge what remains to be realised in works of literary scholarship that appear in digital form.

Within the field of literary studies, perhaps the most commonly produced and most frequently utilised digital resource is the online digital database. Described at the most basic level, a database is “a system that allows for the efficient storage and retrieval of information” (Ramsay, 2004, chapter 15, section “Introduction”, para. 1). As Ramsay (2004) usefully summarises, “[t]he purpose of a database is to store information about a particular domain (sometimes called the universe of discourse) and to allow one to ask questions about the state of that domain”

(Chapter 15, section “Database Design”, para. 1, emphasis removed). While general purpose databases such as *Project Muse* and *Early English Books Online* have been a common feature in the field of literary studies for almost two decades, more recently, a number of what Farmer and Lesser (2008) have referred to as “analytical databases” (p. 1140) have begun to emerge. According to Farmer and Lesser (2008), analytical databases differ from earlier kinds in that they are “tailored to address the kinds of inquiries that scholars tend to ask in a given field of research” (p. 1147).

The past decade has witnessed the publication of a number of subject-specific databases in the field of Irish studies where established scholars have actively experimented with this new technology and the opportunities it affords those studying Ireland’s literatures. From the publication of the CELT<sup>1</sup> database in 1997, a proliferation of online digital databases emerged. However, in keeping with Kelleher’s (2011) previously cited observation, to date, little commentary or extended analysis have been produced concerning the opportunities and implications afforded the field of Irish studies emerging from and enabled by electronic advances<sup>2</sup>.

Responding directly to this absence, this chapter offers a critique of one of the most recent databases of this type to emerge within the field of Irish literary studies, the *Bibliography of Irish Literary Criticism* (BILC, 2010). Moving beyond the metaphorical and celebratory accounts of the new medium promulgated by critics such as Dimock (2007) and Folsom (2007), it investigates both the content of the database and the searches it permits. Examined in light of the developer’s objectives, and in relation to its contribution to current debates in the field of Irish studies, this chapter considers the achievements of the database to date. By highlighting the successes and weaknesses of the database, this chapter simultaneously points towards what remains to be realised by the digital resource and concludes with suggestions for future developments.

1. <http://www.uce.ie/celt/index.html>

2. This stands in notable contrast to similar projects developed in the US, such as *The Walt Whitman Archive* or *The Rossetti Archive*, where the design and development of the digital resource has not only produced a scholarly tool, but has engendered theoretical discussion.

## 2. The bibliography of Irish literary criticism

BILC is a fully searchable and freely available database of Irish literary criticism covering the period from the Irish Literary Revival to the present day. It is a project of the National University of Ireland, Maynooth and was funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS). The database was developed over the space of four years by the project's editor, Colin Graham, and a post-doctoral researcher, Thomas Hubbard. At various stages in the project, ICT colleagues were employed to develop the technical structure of the database, with consultative advice provided by Damien Gallagher, software engineer with An Foras Feasa, and John Keating, Associate Director, An Foras Feasa<sup>1</sup>.

According to BILC's editor, there were two reasons for embarking upon the project: funding and his own academic interests. As previously noted, the project was funded by the IRCHSS; more specifically, it was financed under *Theme 1: Research infrastructures in the humanities and social sciences* of the Thematic Research Grants 2005-2006. The criteria specified by the IRCHSS for this funding strand were as follows:

“This priority will seek to respond to the challenges of creating a research infrastructure in the third-level system in Ireland, which will underwrite national capacity for top class research in the humanities and social sciences. Project Grants awarded within this rubric will support the creation and development of datasets, digitalisation of archives, surveys and methodologies” (<http://www.irchss.ie/awards/scheme-62006>).

Interestingly, and significantly for the project, in a personal interview, Graham (2011, July 18) revealed that, “the funding opportunity was there before the idea” indicating that the proposal for the BILC project was at least partially shaped by the criteria sought for by the funding body. Responding to the particular interest in projects of a digital nature, in drafting his proposal Graham stated that a

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1. The ICT specialist who worked on the project were: Paddy Lyons (NUIM), Damien Gallagher (An Foras Feasa, NUIM) and Danny Fallon (An Foras Feasa, NUIM).

‘database’ would be created which contained the digitised MACHine-Readable Cataloging (MARC) records of works of Irish literary criticism from the Literary Revival to the present day.

While BILC may have been influenced in part by the criteria required by the IRCHSS, the project also developed out of Graham’s own scholarly interests. As the database was designed to address a number of the theoretical concerns raised by Graham throughout his printed publications, it is useful to outline these concerns in detail before moving to investigate how BILC’s editor attempts to overcome these issues through the digital medium.

An overview of Graham’s oeuvre of work as it has appeared in print form reveals the scholar’s preoccupation with literary criticism as it has developed on the island of Ireland. For example, in his seminal monograph, *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture*, Graham (2001) offers a critique of the development of an Irish literary historiography by positing, “some of the schemata into which [Irish literary criticism] has repeatedly fallen” (p. 33). In his later essay, *Irish Literary Historiography, 1800-2000*, Graham (2006) traces “some of the major patterns of thought which have critically shaped ‘Irish writing’ since the Revival” (p. 567) and in so doing, calls attention to the manner in which the field has been mapped as much by literary criticism as by the literature itself.

Notably, in both *Deconstructing Ireland and Irish Literary Historiography*, Graham (2001, 2006) points to the limitations of both projects, calling attention to the fact that neither provides a complete overview of the history of Irish literary criticism. In *Deconstructing Ireland*, Graham (2001) clarifies that the account of Irish literary criticism provided in the book does not chart the exact development history of Irish literary criticism; that, he argues, is “a history still to be authoritatively written” (p. 33). Similarly, in *Irish Literary Historiography*, he accedes that “for reasons of space” the account of Irish literary historiography provided in his essay is “by no means a fully comprehensive survey of every intervention in the field [of Irish literary history]” (Graham, 2006, p. 563). What both *Deconstructing Ireland and Irish Literary Historiography* provide,

therefore, are macro considerations of developments in the field of Irish literary criticism which highlight how concerns with nation and identity have dominated the field.

Extending on his earlier work, a driving concern for Graham in developing the BILC database was to enable researchers to engage with the hybrid body of works that constitute an Irish literary historiography in a manner that could eschew the dominant meta-narrative of the nation. Thus, the overall aim of the project was to “construct a critical literary history that was not entirely hidden, but was unacknowledged” (Graham, personal communication, July 18, 2011) and in so doing, to highlight the extent to which critical writing has shaped understandings of Irish literature. Hence, one of the main objectives of the database was to make available the bibliographical records of material previously difficult to access, stored within physical archives, as well as more widely known and readily available critical works and, in so doing, to enable the user to chart the development and trajectory of an Irish literary historiography.

Capitalising on the large volumes of storage permitted by the digital medium, the project developers utilised the possibilities afforded by database technology to include previously unknown material relating to an Irish historiography. For example, among the 1,215 publications listed in the database, a number of these are obscure or previously unheard of titles. These include older publications such as *The American Traveler* and *The Freeman's Journal*, or more recent, but also rarely considered, titles such as *The Tuam Herald* and *The RTE Guide*. Within these titles, the user of the database finds entries by writers writing outside of the academy.

While the content of the database was compiled, at least in part, to challenge the canon of Irish literary criticism, the structure of the database was also designed with the intended aim of disrupting any linear narrative of an Irish literary historiography. As stated on the *About* page on the BILC website, the database was designed to permit ‘multiple entry points’ to the materials listed in its domain by enabling the user to search according to author, title, date, publisher and by

subject keyword ([BILC, About](#)). Additionally, the BILC database enables users to browse or search by the 1,755 ‘subject keywords’ assigned to the MARC records in the database. It also provides the options of browsing, searching or conducting an advanced search.

In the *Editorial Policy* outlined on the BILC website, the editor proposed that through the varied data contained within the BILC domain combined with the various search functions enabled by its interface, the database “enables users to trace fresh narratives of Irish literary criticism/history” ([BILC, Editorial Policy](#), section “Uses for BILC”, para. 1). It is further claimed that owing to the presence of works relating to the reception of Irish literature in Europe and America and the reception of international works by Irish critics, the database “enhances the international dialogues favoured by the Ireland of today” ([BILC, Editorial Policy](#), section “Uses for BILC”, para. 2). The aspirations for the digital resource expressed in the editorial comments were again reflected in Graham’s own comments on the genesis and development of the database. In presenting the user with various modes of accessing the material contained within the database, Graham (2011, July 18) intended that scholars using BILC would be “afforded the possibility to re-formulate the canon but also to re-formulate the syllabus” (personal communication). Moreover, by permitting the user to sift through the material in a number of ways as opposed to a particular linear narrative, Graham (2011, July 18) envisaged that the database would serve to disrupt the ‘existing story’ of Irish literary historiography. Through these new forms of organisation and access, Graham (2011, July 18) suggested that “the digital format may test the academic assumptions” made in the universities, and in so doing may “ultimately stretch them” (personal communication).

In expressing his aspirations for BILC, Graham’s formulations echo some early accounts of database technology emerging from scholars within the wider literary studies community. Perhaps the most notable example of commentary of this sort was [Folsom’s \(2007\)](#) account of *The Walt Whitman Archive*, published in a special edition of the MLA. In his controversial article, *Database as Genre: the Epic Transformation of the Archives*, [Folsom \(2007\)](#) draws heavily

on ideas postulated by [Manovich \(2001\)](#) in *The Language of New Media* to support his provocative claim that database technology provides a means of overcoming the linearity of narrative which is both demanded and enforced by the codex form. He notes that, for [Manovich \(2001\)](#), databases are “collections of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other” ([Folsom, 2007](#), p. 1574). This is a generally accepted understanding of the database form. However, [Folsom \(2007\)](#) goes further by not only referring to, but extending on, [Manovich’s \(2001\)](#) controversial claim that “database and narrative are natural enemies” (cited in [Folsom, 2007](#), p. 1574). [Folsom \(2007\)](#) proceeds to argue that the database is the most appropriate environment for storing *Walt Whitman’s rhizomatic work* which itself denies the constraints of linear narrative.

While offering a welcome and overdue engagement with database technology from the field of literary scholarship, in his account of the *Whitman Archive* and the significance of the medium for the materials stored therein, [Folsom \(2007\)](#) blurs the boundaries between a metaphorical and a practical account of the database. As [McGann \(2007\)](#) rightly notes in his response to [Folsom’s \(2007\)](#) essay, this “loose way of thinking about our paper-based inheritance as well as about these new digital technologies [...] debases our understanding the matters being discussed” (p. 1589). As [McGann’s \(2007\)](#) response makes clear, [Folsom’s \(2007\)](#) celebration of database technology conveyed through the recourse to metaphor is neither an accurate nor useful way to consider the significance of the new medium for literary scholarship.

More concrete and informed accounts of database technology have been provided by scholars such as [Ramsay \(2004\)](#), [Hockey \(2006\)](#), [McGann \(2007\)](#) and [Price \(2009\)](#). Against claims that databases are tools free from narrative constraints, [Price \(2009\)](#) – [Folsom’s \(2007\)](#) co-editor on *The Walt Whitman Archive* – usefully points out that,

“A database is not an undifferentiated sea of information out of which structure emerges. Argument is always there from the beginning in how those constructing a database choose to categorize information – the initial



understanding of the materials governs how more fine-grained views will appear because of the way the objects of attention are shaped by divisions and subdivisions within the database. The process of database creation is not neutral, nor should it be” (para. 21).

Considered from a practical rather than a metaphorical perspective, it becomes apparent that contrary to understandings of databases as unadulterated sources of information, relational databases are revealed to be carefully constructed ideological tools. By calling attention to the manner in which information is structured and organised in a database environment, [Price’s \(2009\)](#) observations serve to emphasise the fact that these digital resources are, at least potentially, powerful ideological tools. For this reason, these digital resources require sustained and informed scholarly attention rather than metaphorical or idealistic engagements therewith.

### 3.      **Analysing BILC**

As identified by [Farmer and Lesser \(2008\)](#), unlike comprehensive databases, analytical databases such as BILC are tailored to accommodate more specific research concerns. This is achieved through both the careful selection of material to be included in the domain – what [McGann \(2007\)](#) has referred to as “an initial critical analysis of the content materials” (p. 1588) – and the design of an interface which enables searches relevant to the research concerns being catered for by the database. Hence, in analysing the value of the BILC database it is useful to focus on the material it contains, the searches permitted by the interface and the accounts of Irish literary historiography generated by a combination of the two in order to establish what new forms of knowledges are or can be generated through an engagement with the resource.

As previously noted, BILC contains works relating to an Irish literary historiography. Significantly, as stated on the BILC *Editorial Policy* page, “while work by academic critics predominates [...] it has been [the editor’s] policy to include a wealth of non-academic criticism” ([BILC, Editorial Policy](#),

section “Bibliographic Data”, para. 2). Hence we find that materials from lesser-known regional journals such as *The Freeman’s Journal* are listed in the database, as are articles from more contemporary publications such as the *RTE Guide*. Another significant editorial decision was to ensure that commentary on the canonical figures in Irish writing such as Yeats and Joyce did not dominate in the database, privileging instead the records by and relating to lesser-known authors.

While both the inclusion of material published in sources other than academic journals and a shift in focus away from the canonical figures in Irish writing provide welcome developments in the history of the Irish literary criticism, it is important to note that the content of the database was compiled through strategic process of selection driven by the research question the resource was designed to address. Inevitably, this initial critical analysis of the content subsequently shapes the types of knowledges that can be generated by an engagement with the database.

Like the content of the database, the user interface was also designed to enable research queries pertinent to the construction of an Irish literary historiography. The most all-inclusive search permitted by the interface is one conducted according to ‘bibliographical records’. This allows the user to search for a particular word or phrase across the entire collection. For example, if we search contemporary Irish author Colm Tóibín, the database brings back 35 results, where Tóibín features as an author, a subject key word or in the title of an entry (Figure 1). If a more specific focus is desired, the author’s name can also be searched by ‘author/editor’, ‘subject keyword’ or ‘title’ only. As the works listed in the database all relate to Irish literary criticism in some way, searching a particular writer as an author provides an interesting insight into how Irish authors have not only produced the nation’s literary corpus but have been actively involved in mediating the reception thereof. For example, if we search Colm Tóibín as author, we see that the author has published essays in the public media and elsewhere reviewing the work of other contemporary Irish writers as well as providing commentary on earlier writers such as Henry James and J. M. Synge (Figure 2). He has also provided more general

commentary on topics such as *how to read a novel* and *homosexuality in literature*. The results of such a search serve to validate Graham’s (2011, July 18) claim that “criticism is not separate [but ...] intertwined with [Ireland’s] literature” (personal communication) and open up interesting new avenues for investigation into Tóibín not only as writer, but as critic. Alternatively, if we search for Colm Tóibín as subject, we discover the extent to which his own writing is mediated by critical commentary (Figure 3). In ways analogous to Tóibín’s commentary on the works of other contemporary Irish authors, Belinda McKeon and John Banville have provided reviews of Tóibín’s novels. Commentary has also been provided by established academics such as Terry Eagleton, Tom Herron and Eve Patten.

Figure 1. A selection of the results from a search of Colm Tóibín under ‘bibliographical records’

Authors	Title	Year
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	The Belfast test [on Bernard MacLaverty] / Colm Toibin	1981
<input type="checkbox"/> Wallace, Arminia	In the shadow of a playwright [interview-article with Colm Toibin] / Arminia Wallace	1994
<input type="checkbox"/> Kelly, Shirley	[Interview with Colm Toibin] / Shirley Kelly	1994
<input type="checkbox"/> Harmon, Maurice ( 1930 -	[Review of Colm Toibin, The heather blazing] / Maurice Harmon	1994
<input type="checkbox"/> Whelan, G.V.	[Review of Colm Toibin, The sign of the cross: travels in Catholic Europe] / G.V. Whelan	1995
<input type="checkbox"/> Murphy, Hayden ( 1945 -	[Review of talk given by Colm Toibin at the 7th biennial Edinburgh Book Festival, September 1995] / Hayden Murphy	1995
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	Introduction [to Francis Stuart, Black list, section HI] / Colm Toibin	1996
<input type="checkbox"/> Dunne, John	[Review of Colm Toibin, The story of the night] / John Dunne	1996
<input type="checkbox"/> Eagleton, Terry ( 1943 -	[Review of Colm Toibin, The Blackwater lightship] / Terry Eagleton	1999
<input type="checkbox"/> Herron, Tom	Contamination: Patrick McCabe and Colm Toibin's pathologies of the Republic / Tom Herron	2000
<input type="checkbox"/> Kelly, Shirley	Colm Toibin reassessed the old lady of Coole [interview] / [Shirley Kelly]	2002
<input type="checkbox"/> Frazier, Adrian	The double life of a lady [review of Colm Toibin, Lady Gregory's toothbrush] / Adrian Frazier	2002
<input type="checkbox"/> Banville, John ( 1945 -	Homosexuality [review of Colm Toibin, Love in a dark time] / John Banville	2002
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	Introduction [to L.P. Hartley, The go-between] / Colm Toibin	2002
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	Love in a dark time and other explorations of gay lives in literature / Colm Toibin	2002
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	[Review of Vincent Banville, An end to flight] / Colm Toibin	2002
<input type="checkbox"/> Harmon, Maurice ( 1930 -	[Review of Colm Toibin, The master] / Maurice Harmon	2004
<input type="checkbox"/> Clark, Alex	Songs of experience [interview-article with Colm Toibin] / Alex Clark	2004
<input type="checkbox"/> Kenny, John	[Review of Colm Toibin, The master] / John Kenny	2005
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	Synge: a celebration / edited by Colm Toibin	2005
<input type="checkbox"/> Sussler, Betsy	Chris Abani and Colm Toibin in conversation [interview-like format] / edited by Betsy Sussler	2006
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	Henry James for Venice / Colm Toibin	2006
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	Hinterland: the public becomes private / Colm Toibin	2006
<input type="checkbox"/> Walthe, Eibhear	The vanishing homoerotic: Colm Toibin's gay fictions / Eibhear Walthe	2006
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	Single minded [a 'rereading' of Henry James, The lesson of the master] / Colm Toibin	2007
<input type="checkbox"/> Broderick, John ( 1927 - 1989 )	Stimulus of sin: selected writings of John Broderick / edited by Madeline Kingston; with a foreword by Colm Toibin	2007
<input type="checkbox"/> Ryan, Matthew	Abstract homes: deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation in the work of Colm Toibin / Matthew Ryan	2008
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	How to read a novel / Colm Toibin	2008
<input type="checkbox"/> Delaney, Paul ( 1948 -	Reading Colm Toibin / edited by Paul Delaney	2008
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	Selling Tara, buying Florida / Colm Toibin	2008

Figure 2. Results yielded by a search of Colm Tóibín as ‘author/editor’

Authors	Title	Year
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	The Belfast test [on Bernard MacLaverty] / Colm Toibin	1981
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	Henry James for Venice / Colm Toibin	2006
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	Hinterland: the public becomes private / Colm Toibin	2006
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	How to read a novel / Colm Toibin	2008
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	Introduction [to Francis Stuart, Black list, section H] / Colm Toibin	1996
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	Introduction [to L.P. Hartley, The go-between] / Colm Toibin	2002
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	The living breath of things [review of Seamus Heaney, Human chain] / Colm Toibin	2010
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	Love in a dark time and other explorations of gay lives in literature / Colm Toibin	2002
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	[Review of Vincent Banville, An end to flight] / Colm Toibin	2002
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	Selling Tara, buying Florida / Colm Toibin	2008
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	Single minded [a ‘rereading’ of Henry James, The lesson of the master] / Colm Toibin	2007
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	Synge: a celebration / edited by Colm Toibin	2005

Figure 3. Results yielded by a search of Colm Tóibín as ‘subject’

<input type="checkbox"/> Wallace, Armita	In the shadow of a playwright [interview-article with Colm Toibin] / Armita Wallace	1994
<input type="checkbox"/> Kelly, Shirley	[Interview with Colm Toibin] / Shirley Kelly	1994
<input type="checkbox"/> Harmon, Maurice ( 1930 -	[Review of Colm Toibin, The heather blazing] / Maurice Harmon	1994
<input type="checkbox"/> Whelan, G.V.	[Review of Colm Toibin, The sign of the cross: travels in Catholic Europe] / G.V. Whelan	1995
<input type="checkbox"/> Murphy, Hayden ( 1945 -	[Review of talk given by Colm Toibin at the 7th biennial Edinburgh Book Festival, September 1995] / Hayden Murphy	1995
<input type="checkbox"/> Dunne, John	[Review of Colm Toibin, The story of the night] / John Dunne	1996
<input type="checkbox"/> Eagleton, Terry ( 1943 -	[Review of Colm Toibin, The Blackwater lightship] / Terry Eagleton	1999
<input type="checkbox"/> Herron, Tom	Contamination: Patrick McCabe and Colm Toibin's pathologies of the Republic / Tom Herron	2000
<input type="checkbox"/> Kelly, Shirley	Colm Toibin reassessed the old lady of Coole [interview] / [Shirley Kelly]	2002
<input type="checkbox"/> Frazier, Adrian	The double life of a lady [review of Colm Toibin, Lady Gregory's toothbrush] / Adrian Frazier	2002
<input type="checkbox"/> Banville, John ( 1945 -	Homosexuality [review of Colm Toibin, Love in a dark time] / John Banville	2002
<input type="checkbox"/> Harmon, Maurice ( 1930 -	[Review of Colm Toibin, The master] / Maurice Harmon	2004
<input type="checkbox"/> Clark, Alex	Songs of experience [interview-article with Colm Toibin] / Alex Clark	2004
<input type="checkbox"/> Kenny, John	[Review of Colm Toibin, The master] / John Kenny	2005
<input type="checkbox"/> Sussler, Betsy	Chris Abani and Colm Toibin in conversation [interview-like format] / edited by Betsy Sussler	2006
<input type="checkbox"/> Walsh, Eibhear	The vanishing homoerotic: Colm Toibin's gay fictions / Eibhear Walsh	2006
<input type="checkbox"/> Toibin, Colm ( 1955 -	Single minded [a ‘rereading’ of Henry James, The lesson of the master] / Colm Toibin	2007
<input type="checkbox"/> Ryan, Matthew	Abstract homes: deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation in the work of Colm Toibin / Matthew Ryan	2008
<input type="checkbox"/> Delaney, Paul ( 1948 -	Reading Colm Toibin / edited by Paul Delaney	2008
<input type="checkbox"/> Patten, Eve	The sign of the cross: travels in Colm Toibin's Europe / Eve Patten	2008
<input type="checkbox"/> McCarthy, Justine	Atlantic crossing [review of Colm Toibin, Brooklyn] / Justine McCarthy	2009
<input type="checkbox"/> McKeon, Belinda	[Interview with Colm Toibin, marking the appearance of his new novel Brooklyn] / Belinda McKeon	2009
<input type="checkbox"/> McCrum, Robert	You can take the man out of Ireland ... [interview with Colm Toibin, and on his new novel, Brooklyn] / Robert McCrum	2009

It goes without saying, however, that neither the results yielded from searching Tóibín's name as ‘author’ or as ‘subject’ include all the works of critical commentary produced either by the author himself or those concerning his own work.

Tóibín is an extremely prolific writer, having published not only an extensive number of fictional works, but also an even larger number of journalistic pieces. Since the 1970s, he has worked as a journalist for *In Dublin*, *Hibernia* and *The Sunday Tribune*, and as features editor of *Magill*, Ireland's current affairs magazine. In more recent years, he has been a regular contributor to the *Dublin Review*, the *New York Review of Books* and the *London Review of Books*. Between 2007 and 2010, he was art critic for the UK edition of *Esquire* magazine. Which is to say that the author has produced a wealth of critical commentary that is not listed in the BILC database. In his role as art critic for *Esquire* magazine, for example, Tóibín has written essays on a number of international artists including Andy Warhol and Richard Long (<http://www.colmToibin.com/essays>). Yet the international scope of Tóibín's work is not reflected in the results yield from a search of Tóibín as 'author/editor' in the BILC database. With the exception of the essay on Henry James perhaps, the majority of the critical works that are listed as being authored by Tóibín are on topics relating to Ireland or Irish literature. Rather than enhancing 'international dialogues', therefore, the current selection of Colm Tóibín's critical works included in the database regrettably may conceal the global scope of his oeuvre.

This limited representation of Tóibín's critical writings in the results yielded is indicative of a continued dominance of commentaries regarding the nation and a national literature within the BILC database. The majority of the critical works listed which address Colm Tóibín as subject attempt to situate his work under the rubric of Irish literature. For example, McCrum's (2009) interview with the author following the publication of his novel *Brooklyn* is tellingly entitled *You can take the man out of Ireland*. In the article, McCrum (2009) situates Tóibín within an Irish literary heritage by comparing him to figures such as James Joyce, Flann O'Brien and John McGahern. Furthermore, McCrum (2009), like many of the other critics whose commentaries on Tóibín are listed in the BILC database, reads the author's work through a specifically Irish lens.

While such considerations as McCrum's (2009) are useful and serve to emphasise the degree to which Tóibín's writing is connected to his nation of origins, within the BILC database, considerations of this sort have gained

predominance over other possible ways of reading the author's work. This is particularly evident in the 'keyword/subject' searches by which the user can access bibliographical records relating to Tóibín. Given Tóibín's status as a prominent figure in the field of gay literature and the number of commentaries by queer theorists on his work, one might expect that a subject keyword search according to 'queer studies' would bring back works either by or on the author. However, attempting such a search reveals that the term 'queer studies' is not a listed term among the 1,755 subject keywords within the database. While a search of 'gender' brings back results which are pertinent to queer studies, such a lumping together of these issues under the term gender is not desirable. Such a search highlights the extent to which not all trajectories or modes of reading are permitted by the database.

It is important to note, however, that the aforementioned issues of selection and categorisation are not problems unique to the digital medium; they are, in fact, ones which face any collection of Irish writing which inevitably prioritises writings on an Irish subject. But while literary scholars in the field of Irish studies have begun to call attention to the limitations of print based literary collections gathered under the rubric of the nation (Kelleher, 2003; Meaney, 2007), they have not, as of yet, provided similar critiques of digital collections such as BILC. In the absence of any sustained scholarly attention, the ideological trends that inform these resources have gone unquestioned; this absence may in turn give rise to overly celebratory accounts of the new medium such as that offered by Folsom (2007).

As the brief critical analysis of BILC provided here reveals, rather than being an undifferentiated flood of data free from the constraints of narrative, the database is shown to be a significant, though also partial work of literary, editorial and archival scholarship which, despite its desire to enable new narratives, inevitably directs the user according to particular trajectories. Moreover, contrary to Folsom's (2007) claim that database and narrative are 'natural enemies', the account of BILC provided here highlights the extent to which the technical structure of the database is complicit in constructing narratives of Irish literary historiography. Hence, in keeping with Dalbello's (2011) observation regarding

digital humanities projects more generally, we find that “optimism and the excitement about new possibilities for rethinking the texts, canon, and creation” afforded by database technology is “ahead of the actual development work” (p. 496).

#### **4. Making the most of the medium**

While the discussion above demonstrates how the digital medium does not overcome all the limitations of the literary collection as it appears in codex form, the aim here is not to make a case against such digital resources. Rather, the purpose of the critique here is to be constructive: as McGill (2007) has noted, “if we misconstrue media shift as liberation, we are likely to settle for less than the new technology has to offer us” (p. 1595). Hence, following McGill (2007), we can argue that it is only by engaging with digital tools such as BILC that we are afforded an opportunity to identify potential areas for future developments in resources of this kind.

Although considering database technology in practical terms provides a more sobering account of the potentialities of the new medium than those hoped for by Folsom (2007), such considerations also encourage us to ask what future developments of analytical databases like BILC can and should be made in order to make the most of the new medium. As the analysis of BILC provided here reveals, the database, at present, remains a predominantly national project. This subsequently limits the extent to which the digital resource enables the ‘international dialogues’ aspired for by its editor. However, unlike the literary collection as it appears in codex form, owing to the digital nature of the database, it may readily be included within wider networks of digital resources which are international in scope. One such network is the Study Platform for Interlocking Nationalism (SPIN) project (<http://www.spinnet.eu/>), currently being developed by humanities scholars and ICT specialists in the Netherlands. Included as part of this network, BILC may not only move closer towards achieving its objectives, but will significantly benefit from increased dissemination. As the most successful digital resources are, according to Warwick, Terras, Huntington,

Pappa, and Galina (2006), those which “actively pursued the most determined and varied dissemination strategy” (p. 30), this increased dissemination will also ensure the ongoing viability of the project.

Critiquing the BILC database also calls attention to another wider concern within the field of digital humanities: sustainability. “Sustainability” as it applies to digital resources, “signals a broad set of concerns – they are both technical and institutional – about how to maintain and augment the increasingly large body of information that humanists are both creating and using” (McGann, 2010, p. 1). While many of the debates surrounding digital resources have tended to focus on sustainability in either financial or technical terms, as the European Science Foundation (2011) report on *Research Infrastructures in the Digital Humanities* made clear, sustainability involves the “maintenance and preservation” of both the “content [and the] tools that scholars use to interrogate [digital] objects” (p. 21). Sustainability is thus as much about the maintenance and preservation of the materials stored within a database as it is about the technical structure of the resource.

As the BILC database was a project driven by a literary scholar, it is a work of established humanities scholarship. However, since its publication, to date, no further resources have been available to “maintain and actively update the interface, content and functionality” (Warwick, Galina, Terras, Huntington, and Pappa, 2008, p. 395) of the BILC database. While the technical structure of BILC remains, at present, in good repair, the content of the resource has already begun to date, with an obvious detrimental effect on the functionality of the database. For example, on the BILC *About* page, it is stated that the database provides works relating to Irish literary criticism from the “Revival to the present day” (BILC, *About*, para. 1); however, the most recent entry listed in the database was published in 2011, thus indicating that the database has already begun to fall out of sync with recent developments in Irish literary criticism. A practical consideration of the BILC database thus highlights the fact that the future viability thereof is most endangered not by the lack of additional funding or technical obsolescence, but by the absence of ongoing resources from the community for whom it was designed.



Literature from the wider digital humanities community informs us that in order to secure the ongoing viability of resources like BILC, it is essential that clear, long term plans are put in place early on in the development of such projects to ensure that they are maintained after their publication (Warwick et al., 2008). As has been established in the case study provided here, this requires considerations that are financial and technical, but also theoretical and disciplinary. Given the subject-specific nature of analytical databases such as BILC, those who take up the responsibility of databases of this kind need to possess expertise in the field for which they are designed. At the same time, owing to the digital nature of databases, the maintenance thereof also requires a degree of technical competence. As few humanities scholars currently possess the technical skills necessary to maintain and update a database, and few ICT specialists possess the humanities expertise required to retain the analytical nature of databases such as BILC, ongoing collaborative work between practitioners in the two disciplines is imperative after the publication of the resource, in order to ensure that both the theoretical and the technical structures are sustained.

Looking further into the future more positively, it is likely that recently emerging practitioners in the emerging field of digital humanities may take responsibility for digital resources such as BILC. Having received hands on training in the technologies required for designing and maintaining databases for humanities scholarship, this new generation of scholars are acquiring both the theoretical and practical competence necessary to keep analytical databases like BILC in sync with developments in both the humanities and the digital humanities. In so doing, they will not only ensure the ongoing viability of digital databases but may drive these valuable projects forward.

## 5. Conclusion

By moving away from earlier metaphorical, celebratory and perhaps naïve accounts of database technology to more practical considerations thereof, this chapter demonstrates that digital resources such as BILC are carefully constructed ideological tools which, like literary collections in codex form,

face challenges of inclusion, categorisation and narrative. By extension, such considerations also point to the need for sustained critical engagements with resources of this type. By critically analysing both the content and the searches enabled by the BILC database, we can assess what new perspectives on an Irish literary historiography can be generated by an engagement with the new medium. Relatedly, we can determine what search queries are not, as of yet, permitted by the resource, and thus signal towards potential future developments.

A practical consideration of the database also brings to the fore the more general issues of dissemination and sustainability which face all digital resources. By calling attention to the need for increased dissemination and ongoing maintenance of the BILC database, this chapter engenders new considerations regarding responsibility for digital resources: as McGann (2005) has observed “defining it [sustainability] as a practical problem shifts us to ask ‘how’. And when we make that shift we realize [...] that the question ultimately comes down to ‘who’” (pp. 9-10). As this chapter points out, given the analytical nature of the database, the who must possess both the humanities and technical skills necessary to ensure that both form and content of BILC are developed in a manner which caters to the needs of the community for whom it was designed. At a time when BILC is beginning to show signs of scholarly neglect, it is propitious that practitioners with the dual skill set necessary for ensuring its maintenance have begun to emerge from within the field of Irish Studies.

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