Curatorial labour, voice, and legacy: Mary Dorothy George and the Catalogue of political and personal satires, 1930-1954

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**Abstract**

Between 1930 and 1954 Mary Dorothy George wrote catalogue entries for 12,553 ‘Golden Age’ satirical prints. This article examines George as a curatorial voice, an interlocutor between the archived past and her readers. It examines the labour processes that produced George’s contributions to the British Museum’s *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires*, her writing as a corpus, and her interpretations therein. We argue that George’s linguistic and procedural choices have trouble the legacy of the catalogue, a system of knowledge organisation increasingly uncoupled from its circumstances of production whilst remaining foundational to the historiography of long eighteenth century British history.

**Keywords**

curation, museums, professional labour, women historians, Mary Dorothy George
Between 1930 and 1954 Mary Dorothy George created a monumental seven volume piece of scholarship: 12,553 entries spread over nearly 7,000 pages that catalogued British satirical prints published between 1771 and 1832. Her work created a field of study and demystified ‘Golden Age’ caricatures to the non-specialist. And yet before 1930, George was neither a curator nor a historian of the printed image. Rather, she was a well-regarded social historian with a similar biographical profile to her fellow women historians: middle class, no children, though – atypically – married. George’s employment at the British Museum coincided with the height of the marriage bar in British public life, a time when as few of 10% of married women worked, when women faced lingering stigma over their capabilities, and when the perpetuation of an outdated and paternalistic moral idea of the male wage earner saw many pay scales crafted around men’s assumed dependents, among whom were married women, barred from the workplace, expected to be occupied solely with domestic duties. The part-time and task-orientated role that George accepted at the Museum was typical of jobs undertaken by female intellectuals. So too was her status as woman historian who worked outside the university system. Not that the British Museum was an unscholarly environment. In the polite confines of the British Museum print room, George worked alongside notable art historians. And when war meant George was evacuated to Wales with the Museum’s print collections, fellow scholars from many of London’s cultural institutions entered her working environment.

These personal, local, intellectual, and socially prescribed labour contexts produced a deep entanglement with ‘Golden Age’ caricature that would change the course of George’s career. They also produced a profound legacy. Serious study of graphic satire was
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anathema to early twentieth-century historical and art historical practice, and George recognised this. On 17 May 1946 she wrote to William Llewelyn Davies, Chief Librarian of the National Library of Wales, her hosts during the Second World War. By this time, seven volumes of the Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum had been published: three written by George, following four written by Frederick George Stephens that were published between 1870 and 1883. In her letter George rejected Davies’ idea that the National Library of Wales might want a second copy of these volumes. ‘I very much appreciate your kindness in suggesting a duplicate copy of the BM Catalogue of Satires’, she wrote, ‘and I shall remember it when I am tempted to consider if anyone but myself finds it useful’. ‘But’, George continued, ‘I should particularly dislike to present a copy’. Her reason: ‘For 6 ¾ years the National Library copy has been almost uninterruptedly in my hands. I know how very few people are in fact interested in caricatures’.6

George was then self-effacing, even deferentially stating in her preamble to Volume V that she had deviated little from the methods used by Stephens. But colleagues and fellow scholars soon began to praise the product of her labour as a singular achievement. Francis Klingender marvelled in 1947 at a ‘patience and unrivalled scholarship’ that had rendered Stephens’s volumes ‘all but useless’ in comparison.7 In a review published in 1954, the eminent art historian and iconographer Ernst Gombrich further differentiated George from Stephens – his volumes were not ‘up to the high standards developed and set by Mrs George’ – and wrote of Volumes IX and X in particular that:
As in her preceding volumes, she has not only carefully described and transcribed the imagery and captions for identification, but has elucidated their countless topical allusions, listed copies and variants, and supplied a series of indices which should make her work indispensable to the historian of opinion and manners.  

Gombrich’s use of ‘should’ rather than ‘has’ is telling. In 1947 Gombrich had infamously chastised his fellow art historians for not taking satirical prints as seriously as ‘state portraits or altar paintings’. By the tone of his 1954 review, not much had changed during the period in which George had worked on the Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires. But as George’s volumes entered the collections of university libraries, their subjects entered the hearts – and bibliographies – of scholars, particular historians of the long eighteenth century. And so since at least the mid-1960s, when George's illustrated Hogarth to Cruikshank: Social Change in Graphic Satire drew further attention to the vibrant, colourful work of James Gillray, Thomas Rowlandson, Richard Newton, and the Cruikshank family, Mary Dorothy George has been a constant interlocutor between the historian and this remarkable era of graphic reproduction, first in print and most recently online. It is the task of this article to consider what sort of interlocutor George has been and the ways the late-Georgian satirical print was remade between 1930 to 1954 by being recovered from obscurity and by being projected into the world through the labour and voice of Mary Dorothy George.

The article starts by outlining the labour processes that produced George’s contributions to the Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum, and then moves on to explore George’s
In conclusion, evidence of that labour and voice are used to read George’s interpretations of late-Georgian satirical prints. We argue that George’s descriptions present a series of curatorial choices as though decision free. This clear, neutral, and confident voice, an illusion of objectivity that constituted a temporally specific performance of female intellectual labour, contributed – for all George’s erudition and insight – to occasional but significant disparities between prints and her descriptions of them. And these slips demand our attention, for their implications are in tension with the power George had to create systems of knowledge and the power her labour continues to have: the preservation of the Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires in libraries, in databases, online, and as linked open data means that its contents refuse to stay in its historical place.

The durability of cataloguing is of course not unique to George. The portability of systems of knowledge organisation beyond their circumstances of production – such that their logics become ideologies – is a central thread of postmodern archival theory, postcolonial museological practice, and contemporary library science. Historians interested in these phenomena have paid greater attention to specific processes through which the historical record, and especially the archive, has been produced. Paul Desalle has traced the origins of modern archival arrangement and collection to the sixteenth century Iberian Peninsula. Antoinette Burton has examined the durability of archival authority and the influence that the feminisation of certain forms of archival production – in her case in colonial India – has had on what historians do, the ways they think, and how they act. And Jennifer S. Milligan has demonstrated how post-revolutionary ideas of state
accountability remained central to the function of the Archives Nationales through the mid-nineteenth century. Historians interested in the production of history have also examined early women historians. Bonnie Smith has articulated their lack of job opportunities and the ways in which a male dominated profession demanded greater rigour of women than it did men. Maxine Berg has examined their friendships, support networks, and vital contributions to historical knowledge. This work is complemented by recent histories of women’s work in Britain during the early to mid-twentieth century. Helen Glew, Helen McCarthy and Claire Langhamer have all drawn attention to the wider societal constraints that would have shaped professional women’s performance, career development, and authority in the workplace. And Kate Hill, though addressing a slightly earlier period, has examined how these constraints played out in museums. This paper draws on and contributes to these intellectual agendas. Our focus – Mary Dorothy George – was a knowledge organiser, a producer of the historical record, an early woman historian, and a woman who worked in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century. By articulating the historical specificity of George’s contributions to the Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires, this paper also contributes to the historiography of long eighteenth century British history, questioning its reliance on George and her continued hold on our historical imagination. It argues that understanding how Mary Dorothy George’s remarkable legacy was produced, gives us an important insight into the workings of knowledge and power.

1. Producing the Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires
The Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum was published between 1870 and 1954 in eleven chronologically arranged volumes. The first four volumes were written by the critic and curator Frederick George Stephens and described prints published between 1320 and 1770. The last of these volumes was published in 1883. The project was revived in 1930 when George was tasked with arranging and describing the remaining prints in the collection. Each of her volumes included an introductory essay, indices by persons depicted, by title, by subject, by artist, and by publisher, and an entry for each print. Each entry included a description of the content and form of the print, and some were supplemented by a paragraph exploring their historical and historiographical context. These descriptive details were accompanied by a title, a date of publication, the name of the print’s publisher, and the names of the artists and engravers involved in the print’s design. In many cases George identified or attributed these details for the first time.

George was employed by the British Museum to write the Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires. On 12 July 1930 Campbell Dodgson – Keeper of the Department of Prints and Drawings between 1912 and 1932 – reported in a two-page memo to the British Museum Board of Trustees that ‘Mrs. George was prepared to devote five hours a day to it, with eight weeks’ holiday a year, for a remuneration of £300 per annum’, a comfortable wage for part-time professional labour. George was 52 years old, a graduate of Girton College, Cambridge, and ‘a married woman without Children, the wife of a portrait painter’ who was ‘described as being a quick and accurate worker’. The quality and character of her previous work, in particular London Life in the Eighteenth Century (1925) – which Dodgson
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key to her appointment. On 12 July Dodgson’s request to appoint George was approved on the condition that performance criteria be determined and work monitored. But no timescales for completing the *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires* were set. Not until 1954 – 24 years, seven volumes, and four Keepers later – was the project completed.

George’s project-based and fractional contractual status at the British Museum creates significant distortions in how her labour was recorded over these 24 years. Unlike the permanent curatorial staff in the Prints and Drawings Department, her responsibilities did not include developing the collection, selecting items for exhibition, managing loans, or assessing the condition of collection items. Her labour was, therefore, not part of the routine business recorded in the Minutes of the British Museum Board of Trustees or its departmental sub-committees: consideration of items for purchase, applications for research leave, memos presenting plans to improve the environmental conditions in collections stores. Rather, George was, as recorded in a Prints and Drawings Departmental Sub-Committee report to the Board of Trustees dated 14 March 1931, one of the Museum’s ‘outside members of staff’.

George’s ‘outside’ status and lack of day-to-day curatorial responsibilities meant that her labour could be dedicated towards ensuring that ‘the long interrupted work of the Department on English art might be carried rapidly forward’. And that it was. In January 1933 Arthur Hind – who had that year succeeded Dodgson as Keeper of the Department of Prints and Drawings – reported to the Trustees her ‘remarkable progress’. Hind estimated that George’s first volume (Volume V) would make it to press by 1934. But not
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until 9 March 1935 did George deliver the manuscript – containing 1,521 entries – to Oxford University Press. Little about George’s pattern of work between 1930 and 1935 can be ascertained. Hind reflected on 9 February 1935 that George had ‘worked steadily’ on Volume V.27 It appears that this judgement was not incongruous with George having taken time away for ‘repeated illnesses’ in addition to her agreed eight weeks of annual holiday allowance.28 Indeed George’s volume of leave corresponded with the number of days taken by the Assistant Keepers and Keeper in the Department. In a decade characterised by stratified class divisions and extremely limited access to higher education, this points to the class dynamics of ‘steady’ labour.29 After the publication of Volume V, Hind recommended that George’s annual salary be increased to £350.30 This was sanctioned in December 1935.31 14 months later George had one half of Volume VI ‘in galley, and about one quarter in page proof’.32 Hind was delighted, writing exuberantly – albeit with a hint that her labour was of the repetitive variety expected from women’s work – that George had ‘been unremitting in the exacting labour & research of her excellent “Catalogue of Political & Personal Satires”’.33

Excellent her work may have been, but at this time disquiet emerged over how George had interpreted her brief. A copy of the 4 February 1937 Department of Prints and Drawings Sub-Committee Report was annotated with the handwritten notes ‘how many more vols? 4 or 5 more finish by [19]67’ and ‘realistic if descriptions as short as possible’.34 The next month, questions over the duration of George’s employment and the length of her descriptions were joined by the suggestion to give this ‘outside member of staff’ a little less independence. The 13 March 1937 Board of Trustees minutes read:
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(4) Prints and Drawings. - The Sub-Committee generally approved the progress of and plans for publications of the Department. They were particularly interested in the Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires, of which they expressed high approval; they recommended not only that the text be kept as concise as possible, but that special assistance be employed for the index.

Volume VI was published the following year. It was 203 pages longer than Volume V and covered prints from four fewer years. And whilst Volume VI described 26% more prints than Volume V, its ratio of prints described per page was slightly lower than its predecessor. In his preface, Hind gestured towards a justification: the prints catalogued in Volume VI – which covered the period 1784 to 1792 – were ‘more important in character, for caricature was playing an increasing part in the life of the time’. In a contemporary review, Ernst Gombrich described the volume as an ‘invaluable stocktaking’ and commended its author for ensuring that ‘there is hardly a naughty allusion or obscure reference she has not succeeded in elucidating’: great praise, but hardly indicative of labour that fulfilled a desire for descriptions that were ‘as short as possible’.

But if there was a feeling in 1937-38 that George’s labour needed simplification and greater oversight, the prospect of war intervened and plans were made to remove important national collections from London. During the Spring and Summer of 1939, space was urgently prepared at the National Library of Wales and on 24 August 1939 the evacuation of British Museum collections began. Under the direction of Keepers from each department ‘by the end of the first day 10 tons of books, manuscripts, prints and drawings’ had been despatched by train to Aberystwyth. Deputy Keepers travelled ahead to prepare for receiving the collections and managing their arrangement, preservation, and
security at this new temporary repository. George and her husband Eric went with the
collections, the latter helping to unpack and undertaking various voluntary tasks for the
Department.39

With the Georges in Aberystwyth, the Department of Prints and Drawings now
turned unambiguously to securing funds for work on Catalogue of Political and Personal
Satires to continue. On 7 October 1939 Hind wrote in an internal memo that ‘any interval’
in George’s employment ‘might endanger the completion of a most valuable historical
work’.40 Seven days later, in his annual memo to the Trustees requesting funds for the
following year, he was emphatic:

Mr Hind would emphasise the importance of retaining Mrs George’s services, not only next year
to complete this volume, but for the continuation of the work in subsequent years. It would be
most difficult to find anyone later so competent [sic] to deal with the publication, and a work of
this character is of the greatest documentary value to historian.41

Whilst in previous years the requests made in these memos were submitted without
comment, wartime budgets meant that spending had to be justified. George was retained
and on 13 July 1940 the board reported that it had:

Learned with satisfaction that work on departmental publications was being usefully continued
by officers in charge of the evacuated material at Aberystwyth and Boughton.42

Wartime Aberystwyth placed fewer demands on curatorial labour than 1930s London. In
the preface to his 1950 catalogue Italian Drawings in the Department of Prints and Drawings
in the British Museum, Arthur Popham – Deputy Keeper in the Department from 1933 until
his promotion to Keeper in 1945 – wrote that in 1922 Hind had begun arranging drawings for the catalogue but that ‘other occupations prevented his embarking on the work’. Research began in 1934 when the project was passed to Popham, but – he was keen to stress – ‘it was not, however, until the late war when the material was evacuated to Aberystwyth that much progress was possible’. As the two major cataloguing efforts of the Department, annual reports to the Board of Trustees communicated Popham and George’s progress as a pair. For example, in July 1941 the Trustees were informed that ‘[a]t Aberystwyth Mr. Popham had continued his work on the Catalogue of Italian Drawings and Mrs. George her work on Volume VIII of the Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires’. This pairing was not mere administrative expediency: as we shall see, Popham and George evidently worked closely with one another. And, like Popham, George was prodigious – if stylistically a very different writer (see Part Two) – during this period of wartime emergency. Holed up in Aberystwyth for six years and nine months and with the Departmental caricature collection at her fingertips, she finished Volume VII of the Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires by 12 July 1941. A year later Volume VII was published. Much of 1943 was dedicated to revising her manuscripts for Volumes VIII and IX. And in July 1945 the Trustees learnt that Volumes VIII to X were ready for publication.

As it turned out, the volumes were not published until 1947, 1949 and 1952 respectively. George had made good use of the print and book collections at the National Library of Wales to support her research. However, the prefaces to Volumes VIII, IX and X indicate that all three volumes were not finished in Aberystwyth, but rather after the war in
London, where more complete reference collections were available, conditions better suited to making secure descriptions and date attributions. As George wrote in her aforementioned letter to William Llewelyn Davies, there were ‘some gaps in reference books’ at the National Library of Wales that she had ‘found inconvenient’ during her stay. In it she included a list titles covering the histories of medicine, parliament, and London politics that she recommended the National Library of Wales purchase, presumably titles whose absence had delayed the preparation of her manuscripts for Volumes VIII to X.

After the war Popham succeeded Hind as Keeper of the Department of Prints and Drawings. He immediately recommended George’s salary be increased to £450 per annum. In July 1946 he recommended that her salary be increased again, this time to £600, and whilst this failed, he persisted, and in July 1947 in view of what Popham called ‘the importance and arduousness of her work’, George’s salary was increased. In June 1951 Popham petitioned once again to increase George’s remuneration, proposing £800 per annum but achieving only £650. It is useful to read Popham’s actions as responding to post-war changes in public opinion towards equal pay and the decoupling of wages from ideals of the male wage earner and their domestic dependents. For example, Popham expressed concern that like many women, George received less remuneration than a man undertaking a comparable task. But Popham’s repeated petitions were also concerned with local factors. First, he had observed in Aberystwyth that George ‘consistently exceeded’ her contracted hours; as Popham put it in 1951, the *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires* ‘occupies the whole of Mrs. George’s life’. Second, he knew the work that remained after the war – revising, proofing, creating lengthy and complex indices – was
And third, he was mindful of George’s age. In 1945 he noted that at sixty-seven years of age, George needed ‘the assurance of a salary sufficient to enable her to live in circumstances of comparative comfort, without being worried by domestic problems’. A year later he used his Sub-Committee report to return to the subject, noting that George faced many years of work and that the Museum should act to ensure that she was ‘spared the financial and domestic anxieties, which would inevitably impede, and might actually interrupt, her work’. Clearly Popham feared that George would not complete the task to which – now many years into it – he deemed her uniquely suited. All the while, George had continued her task with ‘with unremitting industry’. In July 1949 Popham reported that Volume IX was in proof, and a year later that ‘the final volume, X’ was ‘well advanced’. But, not for the first time, George’s colleagues had underestimated the scale of her task, for one further volume was required, and it was not until 1954 that Mary Dorothy George, aged 76 years old, completed her work on the Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires.

How does this history – distorted as it is by the quiet archival footprint of George’s project-based and fractionally employed curatorial labour – enable a richer understanding of the published descriptions that George produced? First, it tells us that George’s work on the Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires erred towards the cataloguing end of curatorial labour, was closely aligned with prevailing notions of women’s work – task orientated, repetitive, clerical, ‘unremitting’. Second, this history shows the enormous respect George enjoyed among her colleagues at the British Museum. We might expect a manager to celebrate the skill and expertise of individuals in their charge when writing reports to a Board of Trustees or prefaces to printed works. But the language of praise used
enthusiasm and admiration, if keener to emphasise the rate and consistency of her labour
(‘steady’, ‘exacting’, ‘unremitting’, ‘documentary’) than the formidable intellect that
underpinned it. The pursuit of pay rises for George (especially by Popham after the war) is
further indicative of the perceived value of the *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires* to
the Museum and to scholarship, albeit tinged with remorse at falling out of step with the
demands for and implementation of more equal pay regimes. Third and finally, this history
suggests that the Department of Prints and Drawings afforded George substantial
independence. When after returning from Aberystwyth Popham noted how much time
George had spent working on the *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires*, his surprise
indicates that he had not been paying much attention to her patterns of work before the
war. George’s relative absence from many routine aspects of staff monitoring and
bureaucracy, suggests that Popham was not alone in this.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that – help with indexing, book production, and the
odd reference aside – George alone wrote the words published in Volumes V to XI of the
*Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires*, that these volumes contain a corpus of her
curatorial voice. This does not mean that her choice of language and focus in these
descriptions was context free. Rather, her labour produced a corpus of text shaped by a
range of factors: the institutional culture of the British Museum Department of Prints and
Drawings, the expectations of cataloguing and of writing for an academic press, and the
labour conditions produced both by global conflict and by class and gender dynamics
2. Curatorial voice in the Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires

George’s entries for the Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires covered printed images published between 1771 and 1832. Most of these prints were designed by and for London audiences, and told stories of love, war, scandal, misbehaviour, and high politics. These stories featured people and things in motion and in conversation, organised as though on a stage, but frozen in the two-dimensional plane of the printed page, typically in a single scene. To understand the meaning of each frozen pictorial story, audiences were required to parse its content – title, speech acts, labels, figures, props, setting – into a sequential or multi-threaded temporal narrative. Scholars have discussed at length the variable detail and complexity of these narratives as a precursor to assessing their reception and significance. Less attention has been paid to how Mary Dorothy George navigated this complexity to produce descriptions of each print.

Each of the more than 12,500 catalogue entries George wrote for the Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires includes a title, a date, an authorship attribution (usually an artist- engraver and a publisher), and a passage that describes the content of the print and transcribes – in most cases – all speech bubbles, labels, and other text found in the print. Some of these passages interleave descriptions of content with descriptions of socio-political context and citations to scholarship on those subjects, though for detailed or
This method of cataloguing was chosen in order to elevate the status of these collections among historians of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Britain. As such, great attention was dedicated to the onerous task of creating subject indices, vital research tools for readers hoping to use the collection to study something other than the history of the printed image. It was assumed, therefore, that many readers would have been unfamiliar with the collection and without ready access to the prints George catalogued (the catalogues themselves were not illustrated). As a result, it was vital that her descriptions complimented these indices by creating a picture of each print in the mind’s eye of the reader. To do this, George’s narrative portraits used spatial terms to move the reader between people and things, across the two-dimensional plane of the printed page, and around the three-dimensional space of the imagined scene.

Take for example George’s description of *Majesty & Grace*, a William Heath print published in London by Thomas McLean in 1828:

*The little Queen of Portugal, as a child of two or three, stands on tiptoe to grasp the nose of Wellington (r.) who bows low and supports her raised arm. In her r. hand she brandishes a rattle. Over her childish frock is a long train, supported by two grinning n___o pages with*
misshapen legs. A coral and bells hangs at her side, and a long bib or pinafore is decorated with the Portuguese Arms and crown. A very stout lady-in-waiting walks behind them, wearing a ruff and feathered hat; she carries a black doll; behind her and on the extreme l. is a Portuguese courtier also holding a toy, a cock on a pair of breeches. The Duke wears military court-dress, and sweeps the ground with his huge plumed cocked hat. Below the design: As his Grace stoop’d to press the Royal hand to his lips—Her Majesty in the most playful and condescending manner lay’d hold of his Nose—with her Royal finger and thumb—His Grace with his usual brevity and decision acknowledged the high honor done him.64

George’s navigation of space in this description is characteristic of her approach to the material. After entering the scene via a central figure – a common narrative feature of both George descriptions and the prints she was describing – the reader is first directed rightward across the two-dimensional plane of the printed page (‘the nose of Wellington (r.)’). Next, George moves the reader around the imagined three-dimensional space of the Queen’s body (‘In her r. hand’, ‘at her side’) and the relative spatial relationship between the Queen and another character (‘A very stout lady-in-waiting walks behind them’). After this, the description moves the reader simultaneously across the plane and the scene (‘behind her and on the extreme l.’), before – in conclusion – it leaves the reader gazing at the surface of the printed page (‘Below the design’).

Whilst far from formulaic, George’s description of Majesty & Grace does conform to a loose pattern that scholars of late-Georgian prints will recognise. The reader is moved around a sequential or multi-threaded temporal narrative, the meaning of which George relays though clear, neutral, and confident prose, as opposed to stating her opinion or
by transcriptions of conversations between characters, inscribed commentary, captions, and labels, all of which are inserted into the description such that a logical narrative order is retained. The principal characters in the narrative are described with greater detail than supporting characters, and background details of the scene – carpets, doors, lights, landscapes – are described in closing, if at all. And specialist knowledge is used to create concision and simplify the reader’s journey around the print: ‘military court-dress’ is a shorthand for coat, sash, sword, and insignia; a ruff and moustache are collapsed into the term ‘a Portuguese courtier’.

These patterns are observable at scale. Figure 1 gives the 100 most frequent words used in a corpus of 9,330 descriptions derived from George’s entries for the Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires. Of them eleven words are predominately spatial: ‘left’, ‘right’, ‘behind’, ‘Behind’, ‘towards’, ‘background’, ‘extreme’, ‘under’, ‘above’, ‘beside’, ‘Below’. These spatial words occur 28,988 times (4.9% of the 100 most frequent words, 2.6% of the whole corpus), a rate of three occurrences of spatial cues per description in the corpus, many more relatively than in everyday language. It is notable that these numbers are a conservative estimate of George’s use of spatial language because they exclude frequent words with multiple lexical uses that are sometimes used spatially in the corpus, such as ‘on’ (17,568) and ‘to’ (15,775).
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Figure 1 then develops our understanding of the importance of spatial language to George’s descriptions and reinforces the conclusion that one of the key purposes of each entry was to build a picture of the print in the mind’s eye. Figure 1 also helps deepen our understanding of the text that appeared in-between spatial vocabulary. It indicates that George’s descriptions contained a predominance of words that refer to print processes ('inscribed'), the kinds of things most often described ('man', 'hand', 'head', 'hat' and 'woman'), actions ('stands', 'says', 'holding' and 'wearing'), and parts of names ('Fox', 'Lord' and 'John'). It suggests that George wrote in short sentences, indicated by the appearance of many capitalised words ('The', 'He', 'On', 'In', 'Behind', 'His', 'She', 'Below') in the 100 most
Frequent words. And the words absent from Figure 1 indicate that George tended not to use many words that are common in everyday language: verbs in the past or future tenses (‘was’, ‘had’, ‘were’, ‘said’, ‘will’), pronouns (‘you’), modals (‘would’, ‘could’) or informal language (‘it’s’ and ‘don’t’). Whilst these absences are not terribly surprising, they do represent the particularities of her voice. By comparison, Popham’s aforementioned catalogue of *Italian Drawings*, much of which he wrote in Aberystwyth alongside George, does move between tenses and does use modals both to interpret (‘because’) and to hedge (‘might’, ‘could’). Popham’s focus on establishing the provenance and attribution of his subjects is one possible reason why the language in his catalogue differed from the language in George’s descriptions. But whatever the causes of their linguistic differences, the comparison between co-workers does serve to highlight that there was nothing inherent or formulaic about George’s use of language: it was not the product of a manual or stylesheet she was asked to follow, but rather was produced by the historically specific circumstances in which George’s labour took place.

Corpus analysis also shows that George preferred to use generic nouns and verbs with an almost clerical precision. People in prints ‘say’ (8228) things rather than ‘shout’ (637), ‘exclaim’ (431), ‘scream’ (112), ‘cry’ (107), ‘yell’ (25), ‘plead’ (8), ‘proclaim’ (6), or ‘enjoin’ (2). They ‘look’ (2822) rather than ‘gaze’ (265), ‘stare’ (244), ‘gape’ (80), ‘peep’ (60), ‘regard’ (53), ‘admire’ (27), or ‘ogle’ (26). And they ‘walk’ (1090) rather than ‘stagger’ (122), ‘stride’ (108), ‘shuffle’ (6), ‘strut’ (4), ‘prowl’ (2), or ‘amble’ (1). Whilst it is questionable whether ‘shout’ and ‘scream’ should be taken as troponyms of ‘say’, the relatively infrequent occurrence of these words cannot be accounted for alone by
frequency effects in the prints George was describing. Rather they represent her attempts to understand and convey the meaning of each frozen pictorial story, and her choice to use plain and general prose for that purpose.

There are some exceptions. On average, in approximately one in three descriptions, George used an adverb to modify the meaning of verbs. Some of these – ‘walks dejectedly’ – advance the readers understanding of the story playing out in the prints. Others – ‘fashionably’ and ‘ruffianly’ – are evaluative judgements that function as shorthand for social status. But most are used to interpret something about somebody's actions, are word choices whose meaning – to the mind’s eye – is not easily distinguishable: ‘fiercely’ (123) and ‘menacingly’ (59), ‘gloomily’ (57) and ‘disconsolately’ (26), ‘intently’ (96) and ‘fixedly’ (33). George’s voice is also gendered, raced, and classed. She had a systematic preference for describing men as ‘stout and elderly’, and women as ‘fat and old’. And the mind’s eye of the reader is regularly asked to reconstruct what is meant by terms like ‘a Portuguese courtier’, ‘a n____o’, a ‘n_____s’, ‘a Jew’, and ‘a savage’.

George’s vocabulary use was not a function of the prints alone, it arose through linguistic and procedural choices. It was also shaped by the labour conditions she was operating in. Bonnie Smith argues that early women historians performed objectivity, that they adopted methods that enabled them to demonstrate their rigour to a conservative, patriarchal profession. The surface level clarity, neutrality, and confidence of George’s descriptions in the Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires can be read as responding to these underlying professional prejudices and pressures. But George’s voice is also a product of her local environment and the task at hand. A corpus approach to her
consistent lexicon performed rigour, made the reader of her descriptions confident in George’s authority and power, permitted them to build from her prose a mental picture of the image being described. But, depending on the print we chose, closer analysis of George’s corresponding description can shatter this illusion. It is to this illusion and its legacy that we turn in the concluding part of the paper.

3. Scatology, prurience, and the legacies produced by Mary Dorothy George

The necessity for George to make decisions is most evident in how she dealt with those prints whose content was most at odds with the polite moral compass of her profession, her working environment, her employer, and her publisher. Scatology and prurience were a feature of late-Georgian satirical prints: bums, faeces, and bare breasts abounded. Richard Newton’s prints were notably filthy. For example, in the 1796 print *MADAMOISELLE PARISOT* Newton depicts two men looking up the skirt of the eponymous ballet dancer. George described the print as follows:

Mme Parisot stands on the l. toe, full-face, her arms extended and raised slightly above the shoulders, her r. leg extended, the toe a little higher than the waist; she points directly at a stage-box (l.), looking alluringly to the r. In the box sits the Duke of Queensberry, peering through a quizzing-glass under the raised skirt of the dancer. Behind him stands a fat bishop, looking at her through an opera-glass. The men, but not the dancer, are caricatured.\(^{71}\)
Here the ‘features’ of George’s voice are all present. Her prose is clear, neutral, and confident. She describes the narrative content of the satire – the posture of Parisot, the salient details of the two men – in favour of objects like the stage-box and chandelier. She describes the arrangement of the scene both in terms of the two-dimensional plane of the printed page (‘she points directly at a stage-box (l.)’) and the imagined three-dimensional space of the satirical scene (‘her arms extended and raised slightly above the shoulders, her r. leg extended’). But for all that Gombrich praised George for elucidating every ‘naughty allusion’, there is also caution to her prose. Parisot’s décolletage is ignored. And George chose not to mention that Parisot’s toe aligns directly with the parson’s gaze, which – like that of Queensberry beside him – looks slightly below his glass, their unmediated gazes fixed directly under the dancer’s raised skirt, rather than mediated by their quizzing-glasses, technologies used to preserve the pretence of looking at Parisot’s balletic performance. In short, George politely described the lechery in the print, and without any text to transcribe that might indicate, for example, the knowing character of Parisot’s ‘alluring’ gaze, George’s description provides only a partial insight into the meaning and purpose of Newton’s design.

It is telling that examined at scale with George as its interlocutor (e.g. Figure 1), this prurient genre of late-Georgian satirical prints is absent. And it follows that mismatches between print and descriptive text are most apparent in George’s descriptions of such prints. In the case of one particular print, the depiction of graphic sexual violence seemingly created some difficulty for George. Newton’s THE FIRST INTERVIEW, OR AN --- ENVOY FROM YARMONY TO IMPROVE THE BREED, published in London by Samuel Fores in
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1797, portrays an imagined encounter between Charlotte, Princess Royal, and her fiancé Frederick, Hereditary Prince of Württemberg. The latter, central to the scene, has an enormous distended stomach, requiring a footboy to carry it and a carpenter to adapt a table to accommodate it.

In her contextual comment on THE FIRST INTERVIEW, George – quite reasonably – connected the satire to reports of the Prince of Würtemberg’s corpulence, much commented on after his arrival in England in November 1796. Once again spatial information provides vital structure to George’s description from the outset, moving the reader between the people and things that constitute the print’s frozen pictorial story. And various details about the characters and aspects of their dress are teased out so as to advance the reader’s understanding of that story: the Princess is ‘stout but comely’; the Prince wears a ‘gold-laced embroidered waistcoat’ and a coat ‘dotted with stars and orders’; the ‘face and gestures’ of the carpenter are ‘expressing alarmed astonishment’. The description exudes clarity, neutrality, and confidence, and uses a careful arrangement of transcribed text to convey the scene:

The Hereditary Prince of Würtemberg, enormously corpulent, advances in profile to the l. towards the Princess Royal, his stomach supported on the bent back of a n____ o servant in livery (cf. BMSat 5433), saying, I was come from Yarmony to love you dearly, and was take you to Yarmony to love me. The Princess (l.), stout but comely, regards him appraisingly, saying, Lord what a Porpoise Pho!!! The n____ o, with clenched fists and contorted face, shouts: Oh Lord oh lord my Neck will break. I can’t carry it any farther. The Prince’s gold-laced embroidered waistcoat and his ribbon contribute to his grotesque appearance; his coat is dotted with stars.
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and orders as in BMSat 9006. Behind (r.), a man holding a saw stands by a small table out of which a semicircular piece has been cut: he says, his face and gestures expressing alarmed astonishment: *Egad they did well to order a piece to be cut out of the Table, or he never could have reached his Dinner, and how he will reach her, God only knows. I suppose he has some German Method a rare Ram this to mend the Breed* [cf. BMSat 8827]. A patterned carpet and pictures on the wall complete the design.  

Where the description diverges from the meaning and purpose of Newton’s design is in George’s treatment of the interaction between the Prince and the footboy. George wrote that the Prince ‘advances in profile [...] his stomach supported on the bent back of a n__o servant in livery’.  

What this description fails to convey is that the Prince’s right leg is positioned in front of the rear leg of the footboy or that the Prince’s groin is pressed directly against the footboy’s buttocks. But these details are crucial. For, as Temi Odumosu argues, the meaning of the print rests on Newton ‘turning an african footboy into an obscene prop’. Indeed the carpenter’s closing remark – “I suppose he has some German Method a rare Ram this to mend the Breed” – only makes sense if the print is read as depicting rape, as a graphic, scurrilous, and violent response to ‘rumours that the prince was bisexual’.  

As we’ve seen, George’s descriptions do not force interpretations upon their reader. But it is unclear why, in this case, George failed to guide her reader towards a violent and sexualised interpretation of the print’s central act. If George missed it, that sits at odds with reports of her labour as respected, diligent, ‘unremitting’. So too does the conclusion that she favoured the more obvious joke, the story of the day. In this regard, George’s inclusions
And omissions are telling. She described the Prince’s coat and waistcoat, the ‘pictures on the wall’, and even the carpet. At the same time, she did not mention the Prince’s sheathed sword, the location and angle of which create a line intersecting the footboy’s anus, spine, and open mouth. And so whilst George’s descriptions appear outwardly to be decision free, upon closer inspection they are nothing of the sort. Rather, her voice is shown to be undercut by the choice to avoid, obfuscate, and direct attention away from describing graphic sexual violence. In the case of less controversial material, these choices are less apparent, but they are there, hidden by George’s clear, neutral, and confident voice.  

This paper has examined Mary Dorothy George as a curatorial voice, an interlocutor between the archived past and her readers. It has explored how the Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires was made, the voice it contains, and – in conclusion – considered how that voice might have shaped and constrained the descriptions of prints that were possible. That voice was not George’s alone. Whilst she authored each description, they were produced by the historically specific circumstances in which her labour took place. The order, purpose, and consistency of her descriptions was produced by the routine, pseudo-clerical expectation of women’s work. The veneer of authority was produced by the purpose of the task at hand and the professional expectation for women historians to perform objectivity. George’s fractional contract and outside status afforded her the time and intellectual independence to produce lengthy descriptions. This was amplified by wartime evacuation to an environment ideally suited to the production of descriptive cataloguing, though Popham’s very different linguistic choices remind us that the outputs
were bounded: by attitudes deeply rooted in British society, by her white, polite working environment. Her descriptions were gendered, raced, and classed. And they were sexually conservative, sufficiently so to have led George away from the meaning and purpose of prints most at odds with the moral compass of her working life.

This all matters because of the legacy George created. Her insight, erudition, and mastery of source material have rightly been lauded. By investing time and money into George, the British Museum enabled her to produce a remarkable piece of scholarship. But the *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires* marked a high point in investment in cataloguing labour, such that the volume and precision of George’s work shines brightly, time and again drawing historians of the long eighteenth century British history to the prints she described. George then is here to stay, there is little prospect of her work being repeated or substantially revised. And so taking account of her labour provides a way into the ways in which the past has shaped the past, how historical structures of knowledge organisation – be that who did the organising, what was organised, or how that organisation manifested itself – have lives beyond their circumstances of production, refuse to stay in place, continue to have power in the world. These circumstances of production are encoded in the architecture of the printed catalogue: title pages, prefaces, fonts, spines, and the quality of paper are all signals of its historical nature, features that alert the historian – in particular the historian working after the age of print – to the kind of interlocutor they are dealing with. But in a database, online, or presented as linked open data these cues become detached, and their replacement – a bibliographic citation to
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George on each relevant page of an online catalogue – insufficient to evoke the historical specificity of George’s descriptions. Instead, George’s clear, neutral, and confident curatorial voice slides effortlessly into a new and unanticipated context, fitting neatly with the assumed authority of the institution she once worked for, flattening historical context, and creating an irresistible impression of labour free objectivity. Projected into the digital age, Mary Dorothy George’s legacy is becoming ever more uncoupled from her labour. By attending to the voices of curators like George, we make the historical case for rethinking and challenging that uncoupling.

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Mary Dorothy George, *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum*, Volumes V - XI (London, 1935-1954). These volumes contain archaic language, notably words that act as shorthand for people and groups. Readers should note that when quoting from George, the authors have removed racist epithets.


Mary Dorothy George to Llewelyn Davies, 17 May 1946, E 262 (General Correspondence), National Library of Wales.


E. H. Gombrich, ‘Review of M D George, Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum, Vols. 9-10’, *Burlington Magazine*, 96 (1954), 27. There is little evidence that George was influenced by the contemporaneous vogue for iconographic methods. That said, the symbolic visual language of late-Georgian satirical prints do make them amenable to
iconographic analysis; and Gombrich and George were known correspondents. But neither her introductory essays for the *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires* nor her subsequent work on satirical prints – most notably *Hogarth to Cruikshank: Social Change in Graphic Satire* (London, 1967) – display strict adherence to the methods first outlined by Panofsky; Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (London, 1939).


10 The appetite of historians for printed images was eased by the historian’s drift away from rigorous applications of social science methods, by the piecemeal revival of narrative famously described in Lawrence Stone, ‘The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History’, *Past & Present*, 85 (1979), 3–24.

11 George, *Hogarth to Cruikshank*.

12 The catalogues formed the basis of entries for the collections in the British Museum’s internal database. George’s descriptions were added using an Optical Character Recognition (OCR) scanning process. Only a few systematic changes were made to assist search (‘l.’ to ‘left’, ‘w.l.’ to ‘whole length’), as George’s prose as they moved to database and online. Antony Griffiths, ‘Collections Online: The Experience of the British Museum’, *Master Drawings*, 48 (2010), 356–67; Antony Griffiths, *Print Catalogues and Databases: Past, Present and Future*, Association of Print Scholars (2019) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ab_gn6FfyZk, accessed on 30 July 2019; Sheila O’Connell and Sue Walker, private correspondence, February 2019.


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17 Smith, The Gender of History. More recently, Gillian Sutherland how shown how these exclusions interacted with the marriage bar to produce, in the late-nineteenth century at least, a culture of casual lecturing and supervision among the wives of Oxbridge professors, In Search of the New Woman: Middle-Class Women and Work in Britain 1870–1914 (Cambridge, 2015), 36-40.


20 Kate Hill, Women and Museums, 1850-1914: Modernity and the Gendering of Knowledge (Manchester, 2016).

21 Quote from Campbell Dodgson, ‘Untitled Memo (Reports 1929-1931)’, 7 July 1930, British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings. For wage comparisons, see Guy Routh, Occupation and Pay in Great Britain 1906-79, 2nd edition (London, 1980). In fact, George was paid £285 per annum between 1930 and 1935, A.M. Hind, ‘Untitled Memo (Reports 1934-1935)’, 16 October 1935, British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings. In the early to mid-twentieth century, part-time appointments were a feature of both work for middle class women and the perceptions of what their labour should look like, see Glew, Gender, Rhetoric and Regulation.

22 Dodgson, ‘Untitled Memo (Reports 1929-1931)’, 7 July 1930.

23 Notably, Dodgson did not mention George’s employment by the historian Alice Clark in 1913, her work between 1915-1919 in the intelligence department of the War Office, or her status by 1930 as a historian well known inside academic circles. See Berg, ‘The First Women Economic Historians: The LSE Connection.’; Mark


26 A.M. Hind, ‘Report to the Sub-Committee of the Trustees (Reports 1932-1933)’, 24 January 1933, British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings.


28 Quote from Campbell Dodgson, ‘Report to the Sub-Committee of the Trustees (Reports 1932-1933)’, 11 February 1932, British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings. George took 7 days of sick leave and 40 days of holiday in 1932, 14 days and 39 days in 1933, and 16 days and 31 days in 1934, see ‘Absences, Feb. 1, 1932 to Jan. 31, 1933. (Reports 1932-1933)’, February 1933, British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings; ‘Absences, February 1st 1933 to January 31st 1934. (Reports 1934-1935)’, February 1934, British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings; ‘Absences, February 1st 1934 to January 31st 1935. (Reports 1934-1935)’, February 1935, British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings.

29 George was after all, as Berg notes, of the professional class, Berg, ‘The First Women Economic Historians: The LSE Connection.’

30 Hind, ‘Untitled Memo (Reports 1934-1935)’.


34 Hind, ‘Report of Sub-Committee of the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum, 4 February 1937’.
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39 A.M. Hind, ‘Untitled Memo (Reports 1939-1943)’, 7 October 1939, British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings.

40 Hind, 7 October 1939.

41 A.M. Hind, ‘Untitled Memo (Reports 1939-1943)’, 12 October 1939, British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings.


45 Mary Dorothy George, ‘Memo (Reports 1943-1947)’, 21 January 1944, British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings.

In her entry for British Museum Satires 10696 George notes that it was ‘described from a copy in the National Library of Wales’, Mary Dorothy George, *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires*, Vol VIII (1947), p. 504-5.

George, ‘Memo (Reports 1943-1947)’, 21 January 1944.

George, ‘George to Llewelyn Davies, 17 May 1946’.


A.M. Hind, ‘Memo (Reports 1943-1947)’, 15 September 1945, British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings.

Hind, 15 September 1945; Popham, ‘Report to the Sub-Committee of the Trustees (Reports 1948-1954)’, 15 June 1951.

A.E. Popham, ‘Report to the Sub-Committee of the Trustees (Reports 1943-1947)’, 12 June 1946, British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings.

Hind, ‘Memo (Reports 1943-1947)’, 15 September 1945.


A.E. Popham, ‘Report to the Sub-Committee of the Trustees (Reports 1948-1954)’, May 1948, British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings.

Whilst multi-panel satirical prints were produced throughout the period, and grew in prominence during 1820s, they remain a slim minority of the total prints produced.


Mary Dorothy George, *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires*, Vol XI (1954), p. 40, British Museum Satires 15558. In the printed edition, the print is erroneously entitled *Modesty & Grace*. We have removed the racial epithet.

The creation of this corpus – hereafter the BM Descriptions Corpus – is described in James Baker and Andrew Salway, *Creation of the BMSatire Descriptions Corpus* (Zenodo, 2019), doi: 10.5281/zenodo.3245037. The corpus totals 1.1 million words from 9,330 descriptions. This figure is less than the 12,553 descriptions George produced because the data extraction and preparation processes were geared towards ensuring that the corpus only contained text written by George.

These words do have multiple meanings, but having sampled concordance lines (showing the use of the word in context) we are confident that in this corpus they are mostly used in a spatial sense.


See also Salway and Baker, ‘Investigating Curatorial Voice’.
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We have removed the racial epithet.


Odumosu, 81.