

What Did Gissing Read?

Introducing a Valuable New Online Gissing Database

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Introduction

At all times of his life Gissing was “a voracious reader,”¹ a fact readily confirmed by dipping, almost anywhere, in his letters and diaries, where he lists, describes and comments on the books he read, and their authors;² an avid reader, about whom “(i)t can safely be asserted that he read thousands of books during the forty years when he was mentally able to do so.”³ In Korg’s opinion, Gissing’s “real preferences were privacy, meditation, and quiet reading. He was essentially a bibliophile with an active social conscience.”⁴ Not only did he read widely in contemporary and classical English fiction, but also across a broad range of non-fiction subjects. His knowledge of Ancient Greek and Latin acquired in his schooldays which enabled him to read, and subsequently love, classical literature from an early age – a practice and a love that never left him. In addition, his ability in modern foreign languages meant he could also read material in French, German, Italian, and, towards the end of his life, Spanish.⁵ Moreover, he seems to have been able to read remarkably quickly, meaning that he could get through a large number of titles in a short space of time.⁶ Sometimes, the impression is given that either he had taken an early course in speed reading, or that he skimmed through a volume, rather than read it, deeply, from cover to cover to assimilate its content. There are a number of instances where Gissing actually wrote that he was “glancing” or had “glanced” through a particular item, an approach common of course to all readers.⁷ Be that as it may, there is no denying that the act of reading formed an essential, even critical, part of Gissing’s life,⁸ and his letters and diaries are littered with woeful comments, on those occasions when he either had only limited or no access to books, or, for whatever reasons, was simply unable to read. As Korg puts it, Gissing suffered from “the misery of having no time to read a thousand glorious books.”⁹ Or, as Gissing himself wrote rather poignantly; “Sometimes I say, in closing a good book, ‘That I shall never again read,’ and the thought is saddening.”¹⁰

What Gissing read and the extent to which he read, were aspects of his life and work, which fascinated Pierre Coustillas in his studies of the author. In his introduction to Gissing’s diaries, Coustillas wrote, “A checklist of the works he read or purchased (being no collector, he never seems to have bought books which he failed to read) would show the catholicity of his reading and the eclecticism of his taste.”¹¹ As mentioned above, Gissing could read a number of modern European languages, and Coustillas highlighted this facility in a book review in *The Gissing Newsletter* for July 1981: “If ever a catalogue of what he read is compiled, German literature will be seen to have appealed to Gissing earlier than French literature. Italian literature came third in chronological order and in bulk, and we have no difficulty in ascertaining when he turned to Don Quixote in the original and to modern Spanish literature.”¹² A few years later Coustillas returned again to Gissing’s overall reading habits. In a January 1986 article in *The Gissing Newsletter* Coustillas wrote what could be construed – as indeed could his earlier comments – as a plea to the wider Gissing community: “A scholar might indeed profitably enquire into the subject [‘his leisure reading’] and publish an annotated list of all books which Gissing is known to have read. It would prove of great value to any student of the novelist’s culture and would doubtless supply clues to hitherto unsuspected influences.”¹³ Two

years later Coustillas and Bridgwater noted again that “the extent of his reading [...] (and) the impressive list of books he is known to have read” were subjects which had not at that juncture been tackled by Gissing’s biographers and critics.¹⁴

I hope that the ‘What Did Gissing Read’ database may go some way towards fulfilling Coustillas’ wish for some form of ‘checklist,’ ‘catalogue,’ or publication recording what Gissing read.

The Database

Aim

To list the books that Gissing read during his lifetime.

Compilation

The database was compiled using the Google Sheets spreadsheet software provided on a Chromebook. It is compatible with the much more familiar Excel spreadsheet.

Scope

An entry has been made for each monograph, i.e. book, pamphlet, or reference work, for which there is direct evidence from the sources used (see **Sources** below) that it had been read by Gissing.¹⁵ There are also a few entries for individual poems and plays which he read. Some entries have been included where it is not clear whether Gissing actually read the item listed, and there are a few entries for items that he said he *wanted* to read, where, again, it is unclear whether he subsequently did or not. Finally, some entries relate to Gissing’s opinion of a particular author, as author, rather than a specific title by that author.

To help with any research into the extent of Gissing’s reading habits and patterns as expressed by Coustillas in his 1986 note, it was further decided to make a separate entry on each occasion that an item was mentioned, regardless of the specific source, be it in a letter, a diary entry, or in Gissing’s *Commonplace Book* etc., and not just on the first occasion a title is said to have been read. For instance, there are two entries relating to F. Marion Crawford’s *Tale of a Lonely Parish*; one from Gissing’s diary for 7 March 1893, and the second taken from a letter to Algernon Gissing dated 11 March 1893.

Entries have also been made for items that have already been noted as read, but where Gissing is further commenting on a title without necessarily referring to having read it again. For instance, in a letter to Margaret Gissing dated 12 July 1882, he writes “*Our Mutual Friend* I have also read, & like it very much; I should be inclined to put it after *David Copperfield* – though certainly very far after that unsurpassable novel.” This produces one entry under *Our Mutual Friend*, the first for that novel, and another under *David Copperfield*, (which Gissing had probably read in 1878 if not before),¹⁶ as the comment sheds light on Gissing’s thoughts about the novel.

Multiple entries for the same item greatly enhance our understanding of the importance of individual titles to Gissing, by indicating not just where the item was referenced by Gissing himself, but also when, how often, and even, why, he returned to a specific work over the years. Like most of us, “he was fond of returning to his favourite books[.]”¹⁷ Murger’s *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* he claimed in a diary entry for 13 April 1890 to be “reading for the twentieth time”; Turgenev’s *Väter und Söhne* he was reading for the “sixth or seventh time, I suppose” in March 1890. He even commented on his own habit of re-reading, writing in his diary on 8 June 1888, “have taken up [George Sand’s *Elle et Lui*] for odd moments. Do other people re-read books to the same extent as I do?”

It is one thing to know that Gissing received an eight-volume set of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* as a prize at Owens College in 1876, (which would perhaps indicate the first occasion on which he read the work, or at least some of it); or that he bought a six-volume first edition in May 1882, remarking to Algernon that "of course it was impossible not to get this; flesh and blood could not forego the possession of it."¹⁸ But the further inclusion in the database of the numerous entries for Gibbon in Gissing's diaries, letters, and his *Commonplace Book* between 1888 (when he was visiting Italy),¹⁹ right up to June 1903,²⁰ emphasises not just his own knowledge and understanding of Gibbon's work, but also the importance and value he placed upon it. Another fine example of the value of the multiple-entry approach adopted by this database is Homer, an author whose works Gissing returned to time and time again. Simply recording the first time that Gissing read the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* would not "prove of great value to any student of the novelist's culture." Being able to relate the reading or re-reading of specific books to a current project Gissing was working on or undertaking, such as his trips to Italy, would also be of help to scholars.

Sources

Primary

The information included in the database has been extracted almost exclusively from primary sources, as being the most appropriate. The most valuable, yielding the vast majority of entries, were Gissing's letters and his diaries, the two formats being to some extent complementary. As Coustillas puts it; "(h)is diary is, among many other things, a sort of directory to contemporary literature. It bristles with the names of contemporary writers, and his correspondence and personal papers show that he read many books about which his diary is silent[.]"²¹ The letters and diaries were accessed via: Paul F. Mattheisen, Arthur C. Young, and Pierre Coustillas (eds), *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, 9 vols (Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 1990-1997) (1);²² and Pierre Coustillas (ed.), *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: The Diary of George Gissing, Novelist* (Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978) (2). Other primary sources (see rubric "I) Source" below), which proved to be of value were; three non-fiction essays/articles by Gissing (see rubric "I) Source" below) (is one of these references to 'rubric' etc. superfluous?); Pierre Coustillas and Patrick Bridgwater (eds.), *George Gissing at Work: A Study of his Notebooks, Extracts from my Reading* (Greensboro, N.C.: ELT Press, 1988) (4); Bouwe Postmus (ed.), *George Gissing's Scrapbook* (Amsterdam: Twizle Press, 2007) (5); Jacob Korg (ed.), *Gissing's Commonplace Book* (New York: New York Public Library, 1962) (6); and Bouwe Postmus (ed.), *George Gissing's "American Notebook": Notes - G.R.G. - 1877* (Lewiston, N.Y.; Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press Ltd, 1993) (7).

Secondary

Secondary sources have, apart from three items (two of which could perhaps be seen as primary sources), been totally ignored. The three secondary sources I have used are two articles from *The Gissing Newsletter* which highlighted books known to have been in Gissing's library, and a further article outlining the "[t]heatricals at Lindow Grove School" (see **Sources** below for the bibliographic details). Having dipped into the secondary material, I felt there were two basic reasons why, at this stage, it felt unnecessary to devote potentially a lot of time to examining them. The two reasons were 'repetition' and 'uncertainty.' Scanning the secondary sources would naturally have led to those sources

frequently repeating the same information about which books Gissing had read, as they would be taking that information from the very same primary sources used for this database. Little, if anything, might thus be quickly gained from using secondary sources. ‘Uncertainty’ however encompasses a different problem for this database. It has already been noted that even from the primary sources, it is clear that there are books referenced by Gissing, where it is not 100% clear whether he had in fact read them – quite apart from those items which Gissing expressed a wish to read sometime in the future, which may or may not have happened. This uncertainty raises its head quite frequently in the secondary literature, and is of two kinds; firstly, acknowledged uncertainty, where terms such as ‘possibly,’ ‘may have’ or ‘probably’ are used in association with Gissing’s reading, and, secondly, unacknowledged uncertainty or the bold/bald statement as fact, where terms such as ‘must have,’ ‘is believed to have,’ or ‘surely had read’ are used.

Coustillas provides two good examples of the acknowledged uncertainty. He suggests for instance that Gissing “may very well have been acquainted with Bergson’s early works,”²³ and, elsewhere, that he may “possibly” have read Francis Trollope’s *Jessie Phillips*.²⁴ In neither instance is there however any direct evidence from the primary sources that Gissing had indeed read the material Coustillas highlights. Although the conjecture may be valid, I felt that adding such titles to this database would be inappropriate. An example of the unacknowledged uncertainty, where a statement is made as being a fact, can be found in the Vogelers assertion that Gissing ‘knew this book’ [Hubert Crackanthorpe’s *Wreckage*] by August 1896.²⁵ The relevant diary entry suggests that Gissing *knew of* this book, but there is no firm indication that he had read it.²⁶ Given that Gissing was “usually content to record what he had read,”²⁷ that he did so meticulously, and that Crackanthorpe was personally known to him, it seems strange that he would not have noted that he had read the work, if he had done so. Once again, without clear evidence from the primary sources, it feels inappropriate simply to add this title to the database at this point in time. Similar examples of unacknowledged uncertainty can be found in the monograph secondary literature. Delany writes, when Gissing went to Paris in 1886, that he “surely had read [...] Zola’s *Therese Raquin*.”²⁸ I have not found any direct evidence in the primary sources that Gissing had done so. Much earlier, Mary Yates in her study of Gissing referred to Izaak Walton as being “his favourite.”²⁹ Although it is true according to his diary that Gissing had read *The Complete Angler*, there is no clear indication to justify Yates’ claim.³⁰

Nevertheless, in the future, a detailed study and analysis of the secondary literature, in monograph and periodical form, could well lead to more examples of material Gissing read, material not revealed from the primary sources. Careful study would be necessary to ensure that there is adequate evidence that these items had indeed been read by Gissing.

Arrangement

The entries in the database are arranged alphabetically in rows with the surname of the author of the work in question on the left, and with other columns providing more information. Including the author’s surname column, there are potentially eleven columns of information for each entry, ranging from **A** to **L**.

Sample Entry

A **B** **C** **D** **E** **F** **G** **H** **I** **J** **K** **L**
Barrie | James Matthew | *The Little Minister* | F | Y | 1891 | 1894 | Jly 26th | 2 | LB | E | 'Barrie's
[title]'

Each column is discussed in more detail below.

A) Author's Surname

This is the main filing element for the database. Where two or more authors share the same surname, the entries are arranged secondly, again alphabetically, by first forename. Anonymous books and a number of reference works have been entered under 'Anon.' Pseudonymous items have been entered under the pseudonym and not the author's real name.

B) Author's Forenames

Generally, these are given in full, while titles, such as 'sir,' 'lord' or 'mrs' have normally been omitted. Where an item has been written by more than one author, the second author is included in this column.

C) Title of the Work

Wherever possible the full title of the work has been given. However, in many cases Gissing does not state the title of an item he is reading, instead noting 'read a little Balzac,' or 'bits of De Quincey.' In certain instances, it can be deduced what the item was, but this is not always the case. In those instances, 'Unnamed' has then been entered in the relevant cell.

D) Genre

This column notes whether the entry concerns a work of fiction, 'F,' or nonfiction, 'NF.' Religious works, such as *The Bible*, have not been assigned a designation, and on occasions this cell is left blank as it is unclear whether the entry is referring to a work of fiction or nonfiction.

E) New

This column shows when an item has been entered the first time that it has been read; this is indicated by a 'Y.' Where a specific item has been noted as 'Unnamed,' this column has been left blank, as it is obviously not clear whether that item has in fact been read before or not. However, where there is only one 'Unnamed' item by a specific author, a 'Y' has nevertheless been added in this column, as logically it must be a new item. Where it is unclear whether Gissing did read the item in question, this column has normally been left blank.

F) Date of Publication

Generally, this refers to the date of first publication of the item in question, although when it is clear that a specific, dated, edition of an item has been read by Gissing, then this date has been given instead. Dates of publication have been given only for items published since 1800 (an arbitrary decision on my part!). Obviously, 'Unnamed' items do not have an entry in this column.

G) Year Read

This column gives the year in which the item was read and noted, where known.

H) Month and Day when Read

This column gives the month and the day, either that the item was being read or was noted as having been read. Where the item was read more than once, a new entry, with a new date, including the year, has been made for each date on which the item was read. In such cases those entries are given in date order. This allows the user to see how often over a period of time, perhaps a few days, perhaps some weeks, or over the years, Gissing read the particular item. Forster's *Life of Dickens*, he read for instance in February 1874, January 1888 and August 1897, at the very least. Where an item has been read on successive days, only one inclusive date statement has been made. For instance, according to his diary, Gissing read Hesiod's *Theogony* in December 1890. There is one entry in the database for Dec 13th - 16th, indicating that Gissing noted he read Hesiod on December 13th, 14th, 15th and 16th. There is then a second entry indicating that Gissing returned to reading *Theogony* on Dec 19th.

I) Source

The abbreviations for the sources used to find the individual entries are:

1 = Paul F. Mattheisen, Arthur C. Young and Pierre Coustillas (eds.), *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, 9 vols. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 1990-1997); (1GF = Appendix III "Gabrielle Fleury's Recollections of George Gissing," *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, vol. 9, pp. 275-321.)

2 = Pierre Coustillas (ed.), *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: The Diary of George Gissing* (Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978).

3 = The following miscellaneous non-fiction items by Gissing:

a). "The Hope of Pessimism," in Pierre Coustillas (ed.), *George Gissing Essays and Fiction*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), pp. 75-98.

b). "The Coming of the Preacher," in Jacob and Cynthia Korg (eds.), *George Gissing on Fiction* (London: Enitharmon Press, 1978), pp. 94-97.

c). "The English Novel of the Eighteenth Century," in Jacob and Cynthia Korg (eds.), *George Gissing on Fiction* (London: Enitharmon Press, 1978), pp. 99-119.

4 = Pierre Coustillas and Patrick Bridgwater (eds.), *George Gissing at Work: A Study of His Notebooks. Extracts from My Reading* (Greensboro, N.C.: ELT Press, 1988);

5 = Bouwe Postmus (ed.), *George Gissing's Scrapbook* (Amsterdam: Twizle Press, 2007).

6 = Jacob Korg (ed.), *Gissing's Commonplace Book* (New York: NYPL, 1962).

7 = Bouwe Postmus (ed.), *George Gissing's "American Notebook": Notes - G.R.G. - 1877* (Lewiston, N.Y.; Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993).

8 = The following items from *The Gissing Newsletter* and *The Gissing Journal*:

a). Pierre Coustillas, "Gissing's Library. Books in the Gissing Room at the Chateau de Chasnay," *Gissing Newsletter*, 7:2 (April 1971), pp. 2-15.

b). "Note re a catalogue of Gissing material for sale," *Gissing Journal*, 28:3 (July 1992), p. 39.

c) Pierre Coustillas, "Theatricals at Lindow Grove School," *Gissing Newsletter*, 12:3 (July 1976), pp. 1-6.

9 = Miscellaneous.

a) Pierre Coustillas (ed.), *Henry Hick's Recollections of George Gissing* (London: Enitharmon Press, 1973).

J) How

The column labelled 'how' aims to provide some information as to where Gissing obtained the item referred to in the entry. The abbreviations used are: B = bought; O = owned; LR = library read; LB = library borrowed; S = sent, given or lent; DNK = do not know. It is more than likely in the last case that further research would indicate whether the item falls into one of the other categories, but the indeterminate nature

of many of Gissing's notes about what he read, makes categorisation under 'how' difficult and time-consuming.

K) Language

This column specifies the language of the item. The abbreviations used are: E = English; F = French; G = German; I = Italian; S = Spanish; AG = Ancient Greek; and L = Latin. Again, as with other information taken from the relevant sources, it is not always perfectly clear what the specific language of the item was. Sometimes an entry with a ? has been included, i.e. AG?; sometimes an intelligent guess has been made. An entry with an asterisk*, i.e., F*, indicates that the work was not originally in French, but Gissing read it in that language so that he could gain access to books in languages he was not familiar with. A note giving the language of the original has been added to column **L)** for the individual entry.

L) Notes

This column contains a wide variety of further information about the entry, depending on the nature of the entry, from which source it was taken and so on. For instance, in entries taken from Gissing's letters, the recipient of the letter has been included. There are a few, relevant examples where Gissing himself was the recipient. Unless the surname has been given, the following abbreviations have been used: EB = Eduard Bertz; GF = Gabrielle Fleury; AG = Algernon Gissing; CG = Catherine Gissing; EG = Ellen Gissing; MBG = Gissing's mother; MG = Margaret Gissing; WG = William Gissing; MR = Morley Roberts. Quotes from all the sources used have been included where appropriate, although not necessarily in their entirety – '[...]' indicates that relevant words have been omitted. Many of the quotes are simple statements by Gissing, such as 'Reading Homer,' or 'Finished Burns,' or even just 'Gregorovius.' The '[title]' is basically a shorthand way of indicating what Gissing was reading. Sometimes Gissing gives a full title, sometimes a shortened title, sometimes a not entirely correct title! The specific source would need to be consulted for complete accuracy. Longer quotes tend to be where Gissing has commented either directly on the item itself – 'paltry trash'; or on the author, – 'he is a big, strong man, say what one will'; or on the author's works in general – 'throughout the writing is sustained at a wonderful pitch.'

The Future

This database has its shortcomings in terms of its coverage, but I felt that it was necessary for me to see it made available in its current state, rather than wait until possible additions had been made. As noted above, reading through the secondary literature on Gissing might be productive in terms of extra entries. It might also be of value/interest to include separate entries for those books which Gissing had himself read and which he either mentions directly, or quotes from in his fiction; examples such as Dante's *Inferno*, Hans Christian Andersen's *The Improvisatore* and Palgrave's *Golden Treasury in The Emancipated*. Or even entries for those books mentioned in his novels and short stories for which there is no direct evidence that he himself had read them, such as Godwin's *Political Justice* and Louis Figuier's *The World Before the Deluge in Born in Exile*.

I am hoping that this database may be made available in such a way that any errors can be corrected, current omissions rectified and further entries added – perhaps by following the suggestions in the previous paragraph, or indeed using other approaches that might reveal more material that Gissing had read.

In a database of this size and complexity there will inevitably be mistakes, for which I apologise. I hope such mistakes have been kept to a minimum and that they can be corrected in due time.

And finally...

The “What did Gissing Read” database is not the ‘checklist’ or ‘catalogue’ that Professor Coustillas wrote about all those years ago. However, by bringing together the relevant material from the most appropriate sources, the database has made the job of any Gissing scholar researching any aspect of Gissing’s reading behaviour that much easier. The basic structure of the database means that answering simple questions such as which authors did he read, what did he read and when did he read it very straightforward. The multiple entry approach also allows the researcher to examine which books Gissing returned to over a certain period of time, whilst the addition of the notes/quotes enhances the basic bibliographic information.

The collocation of relevant data in this way facilitates and makes much more convenient all kinds of different investigations of and queries about Gissing’s reading habits. For instance, when dealing with fiction, which contemporary novel writers did he read, and what was his general opinion of them – both popular and more heavyweight authors? Did his opinion of individual authors change over time, and why? What authors did he **not** read? What classical English language novelists had he read (and similarly had not read), and did he continue to read them throughout his life, as he clearly did with many other authors? Are there any patterns to the books he bought, rather than borrowed? Were there any styles of novel that Gissing seems to have particularly liked, or disliked? As a novelist whose work frequently featured contemporary London, what authors from the ‘slum’ or ‘cockney’ school of novelists had he read, and what was his opinion of them? These are just some of the potential queries that the “What did Gissing read” database makes more practical.

As far as his non-fiction reading was concerned, are there any broad, or specific subject areas that he read with regularity, even enjoyment, leaving aside the material that he read as detailed background or of general relevance/interest to any novel he was working on at that time? Given his ability in a number of modern languages, did he read non-fiction, as well as fiction, works in those languages, and with equal facility in each language?

On top of all this, a database gives the user the extra ability to manipulate the data in various ways, which would be more or less unachievable from reading the primary sources, or at least much less convenient. Thus if the researcher wanted to know which books Gissing read in 1889, they could plough through his letters, diaries etc. for that year, or they could go to the top of Column G, click on the down arrow, which gives a list of functions available. Choose ‘Sort sheet A to Z’, which will put Column G in date ascending order. Then scroll through down to 1889, and there are all the books Gissing read that year. If ‘Sort sheet Z to A’ were chosen, this would, apart from those items without a clear date, provide a list of the books he had read in 1903, prior to his death in that year. Similar strategies would allow the researcher to locate all the books Gissing read in French, using Column K. Again, go to Column K, click on the down arrow, and continue as above, and all the items read by Gissing in French (F, or F*) will be brought together. Using a similar technique in Column J, it would be possible to discover which books Gissing had borrowed from libraries (LB). Column L could be used to locate those books about which Gissing wrote to

Henry Hick. Go to the Edit function at the top, choose 'Find and replace' and type 'Hick' into the Find box, click on 'Find' and then scroll through all the entries which include his name. Columns can also be moved. So, if the researcher wanted to quickly see what authors Gissing read in what language, they could move Column K to be adjacent to Column A. Similarly date Column G could be moved alongside Column A to examine more easily when he read a specific author. On a lighter note, a researcher could even check those works which Gissing described as "paltry" - used six times about five different books by five different authors. (Note that this discussion about how the data in the database can be manipulated is based on the operations that can be worked in the Google Sheets spreadsheet. I am sure that the more computer literate will find other, better and easier ways to use the data.)

Coustillas hoped that "an annotated list of all books which Gissing is known to have read [...] would prove of great value to any student of the novelist's culture" and "would doubtless supply clues to hitherto unsuspected influences." The question of linking what Gissing read and what he was influenced by is a complex one. The database can show that Gissing read numerous novels by Meredith and Hardy over the years, but does volume read indicate influence? On the other hand, he also read one novel by Jens Jacobsen, his *Niels Lyhne* in German over a number of days in 1889 and then again in 1890, and thought it "enjoyable." Of more relevance here is that he further wrote to Bertz in relation to *Niels Lyhne* that "I am growing dissatisfied, in some degree, with my old *method*. Something I have learned from Jacobsen [...] I can no longer write - as I used to - with slight preparation. I grow more & more laborious in my preliminary study."³¹ This would certainly indicate some degree of influence from reading just the one novel. What other novels may Gissing have read, perhaps just once, and been influenced by and in what way? All the database can do is indicate what novels he did read, perhaps with some helpful comments he made, i.e., "supply clues." Only close analysis of his work against those of a potential influencer would actually indicate whether any influence had taken place.

There is no doubt however that the "What did Gissing Read" database does show "the catholicity of his reading and the eclecticism of his taste." But, in all the discussions about what Gissing read, it is necessary to sound an obvious, yet nonetheless, important warning. What he read was always determined by a number of factors, which themselves varied during his lifetime; how much money he had with which to buy the books he wanted; whether he could afford the subscription to this or that local library; where was he living at the time and what libraries were there in the locality; how many friends/fellow authors/publishers sent him their works; and most critically, what access did he have to books via the different libraries he used, and what did they stock?

When in America, he made use of the resources of the "glorious" public library in Boston, commenting that "there are very few books [...] that it does not contain."³² On his return to London, his ticket to the British Museum Library allowed him to delve into their vast stock of books, even if he couldn't take any home. Using circulating and/or public libraries would greatly affect what was at his disposal. The new Tate Public Library in Brixton, even if its stock was greater than that of Exeter Public Library, had its limitations. Andrews Circulating library in Epsom, which Gissing used between late 1894 and 1896, was linked to the major resource of Mudie's, from which books could be borrowed, including from their significant foreign language material stock.³³ Once Gissing decided to pay the £3 subscription

for the London Library in June 1897, he gained access to their large and specialist stock, from which, as a country member, he could receive parcels of books, without having to go up to London.³⁴ He even talked to the librarian, asking him if the Library “would at once purchase [...] two or three books [...] which they haven’t got – Ricci on Ravenna, and Augustus’ *De Antiquissimus Hymnis*.”³⁵ Moving to France in 1899 clearly, and obviously, affected his access to English language materials.

To close this introduction to the “What did Gissing Read” database, and to emphasize how what Gissing read was largely dictated by the libraries he had access to, and how critical that was to his very life, I have chosen the following poignant, but revealing, comments from his diary, dated 21 May 1902. “Having nothing to read, and nothing to do, passed the day in utter idleness[. ...] A sort of destiny of idleness and wasted time seems to oppress a great part of my life. Each time a day such as this comes, I make a resolve that it shall never happen again. But circumstances are too strong for me. Indeed, the only way in which I could avoid this miserable folly of barren hours would be to live always in reach of a large library – the impossible thing for me, now and ever.”³⁶

I am extremely grateful to Professor Mitsu Matsuoka not just for helping me tidy up the database but also above all for agreeing to mount ‘What Did Gissing Read’ and this Introduction on his website ‘Gissing in Cyberspace’. They can both be found at <http://victorian-studies.net/Gissing-alt.html>

The database, which has been mounted in Excel form, can be printed out or downloaded, but cannot be changed, corrected or added to in situ. If there are any changes etc. to be made please channel them to me via the Editor of the Journal and I will revise the database as appropriate.

¹ Pierre Coustillas and Patrick Bridgwater (eds.) *George Gissing at Work: A Study of his Notebooks. Extracts from my Reading*. (Greensboro, N.C.: ELT Press, 1988), p. 14.

² Paul F. Mattheisen, Arthur C. Young and Pierre Coustillas (eds.) *The Collected Letters of George Gissing* 9 vols (Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 1990-1997); and Pierre Coustillas (ed.), *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: The Diary of George Gissing, Novelist* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1978).

³ Coustillas and Bridgwater, *op. cit.* p. 15.

⁴ Jacob Korg (ed.) *Gissing’s commonplace Book* (New York: New York Public Library, 1962), p. 8.

⁵ Possibly even modern Greek? In a letter to Algernon of 4 November 1889, Gissing wrote as follows: “Baedeker’s ‘Greece’ (I have bought the German ed. for practice) is an admirable book; already I have learnt the necessary elements of modern Greek from it.” I have however found no references to Gissing actually reading a book in modern Greek, although entries in his diary whilst visiting Athens in 1889, would suggest that he could at the very least cope with newspapers in modern Greek. Cf Pierre Coustillas *London Life*, pp. 176, 181, 185 and other pages, where Gissing has noted down modern Greek words.

⁶ “Afternoon to Grosvenor, where I got vol. I of Hardy’s *Wessex Tales*, and vol. II of Lee’s *Juvenilia*. Read them both in an hour and a half.” Diary entry for 8 May 1888.

⁷ See, for instance, the following entries: Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*, diary entry for 9 November 1889; Charles Dickens *Uncommercial Traveller*, diary entry for 25 May 1878; and Mrs Humphrey Ward *The History of David Grieve*, diary entry for 7 August 1892.

⁸ Where he lived was, in part, determined by whether he had access to a decent library. For instance, proximity to the newly opened Tate Public Library in Brixton was a major reason for his moving there. For more on Gissing and his use of libraries in general, see my article “George Gissing and Libraries,” *Gissing Journal*, 40:4 (October 2004), pp. 7-13.

⁹ Korg, *op.cit.*, p. 62.

¹⁰ Letter to Edith Sichel, dated 20 July 1889, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, p. 89.

¹¹ Coustillas, *London Life*, p. 12.

¹² Pierre Coustillas, "Review of Gisela Argyle's *German Elements in the Fiction of George Eliot, Gissing and Meredith*," *Gissing Newsletter*, 18:3 (July 1981), p. 31.

¹³ Pierre Coustillas, "Good News for Gissing: a New Collected Edition Announced," *Gissing Newsletter*, 22:1 (January 1986), p. 7.

¹⁴ Coustillas and Bridgwater, *op.cit.*, p. 14.

¹⁵ At one stage in the database's construction I also thought to include the periodicals, journals, and newspapers that Gissing had read, but finally decided against doing so. I felt that this would bulk out the database, take me a long time to accomplish and probably include numerous relatively trivial entries. Nevertheless, tackling this aspect of Gissing's reading remains a project worth undertaking, as it would further contribute towards a more comprehensive picture of what Gissing read.

¹⁶ Letter to Algernon, 17 May 1878.

¹⁷ Coustillas and Bridgwater, *op.cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁸ Letter to Algernon, 7 May 1882.

¹⁹ Gibbon is referred to twice, once in a diary entry for 16 December 1888, and once in a letter to Bertz of 3 January 1889.

²⁰ Gibbon is referred to in a letter to Clara Collet dated 12 June 1903.

²¹ Coustillas, *London Life*, p. 12.

²² These numbers refer to the numbers used in column **I** of the database, which refers to the sources used. See below.

²³ Pierre Coustillas, "Henry Ryecroft's 'Trick' again," *Gissing Newsletter*, 7:2 (April 1971), p. 15.

²⁴ Pierre Coustillas, "Review," *Gissing Newsletter*, 6:2 (April 1970), p. 18.

²⁵ M. S. and A. R. Vogeler, "Mr. Gissing has everything he requires," *Gissing Newsletter*, 20:3 (July 1984), p. 17.

²⁶ Diary entry for 25 August 1896.

²⁷ Coustillas, *London Life*, p. 11.

²⁸ Paul Delany, *George Gissing: a Life*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2008), p. 103.

²⁹ Mary Yates, *George Gissing: an Appreciation*, (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1922). p. 94.

³⁰ Diary entries for 14 and 15 February 1891.

³¹ Letter to Eduard Bertz 21 October 1889.

³² Letter to Algernon, 13 November 1876. By 1878 the library had outgrown the original building designed to hold 240,000 volumes.

³³ It is worth noting that during this period, Gissing received a presentation copy of Mudie's *Catalogue*, so he knew what was available to him. Diary entry 23 January 1896.

³⁴ Diary entry for 12 July 1897, noting receipt of a parcel from the London Library, whilst an entry for 6 May 1898 notes that he sent for books from the Library. Unfortunately on neither occasion does he say what the books were, although it is possible to see what books he read at the time from entries in his diary, some of which were likely to have come from the London Library.

³⁵ Diary entry for 10 July 1897.

³⁶ Diary entry for 21 May 1902.