**Report on ‘Encounters, Legacies, Affinities: The Eighteenth Century in the Present Day’, University of York, 28-29th June 2013 – Andrew McInnes**

On a sunny weekend after the end of term, I took five undergraduate students from the University of Exeter, Cornwall Campus – Joan Passey, Lizzi Bowerman, CJ Russett, Estelle Hakner and Chloe Statham – further North than some had ever been before. These outstanding, ambitious and innovative students presented their independent research into the digital archive Eighteenth-Century Collections Online at an international interdisciplinary conference and arts festival at the University of York’s Centre for Eighteenth-Century Studies. Chloe raises the stakes of the enterprise, declaring: ‘I went to the conference with the view that it would either make or break my desire to become an academic and pursue an MA and PhD’. Estelle agreed, commenting: ‘As undergraduate students from Cornwall, the immense journey to York served as an appropriate metaphor for how far we had come, academically, to have this opportunity’, worrying about ‘the prospect of terrifying professors grilling our ideas and exposing our inexperience’. CJ also found himself surprised at ‘the looming prospect of mingling with and presenting to some of the very best in the field of eighteenth-century studies’.

From the moment we arrived at the pre-conference drinks at CECS’ local The Lamb and Lion, we were made to feel warmly welcomed, primarily by the charismatic conference organizer Adam Perchard, ably assisted by his unflappable colleague Ruth Scobie and other staff members, artists and family members. My students’ expectations of stuffy formality were blown away by a whirlwind of excitement, good humour, debate and pet pictures. Estelle describes how ‘a world of exciting prospects opened up before us as we were welcomed into a community of intellectually awe-inspiring, fascinating and hilarious academics’.

The next morning the conference began with a keynote speech on coffeehouses from the eighteenth century to the present day by Markman Ellis, described as ‘a key moment of the conference’ by Estelle. His presentation stressed the performance of sociability, tinged with the possibility of dissent, in the eighteenth-century coffeehouse, which he argued has gone through a process of atomisation and fragmentation in the present Starbucks era. Building on Ellis’s critique of the post-colonial implications of Starbuck’s advertising campaigns, Chloe Statham ‘asked Ellis whether the eighteenth-century coffee houses similarly highlighted the colonial and trade origins of the coffee or whether they suppressed this. I was delighted to see that my question was one that Ellis had not thought about, and instead of having an answer he commented that it would be a good area for research. In asking a question that prompted such a response from a professor that I admire, I gained a real confidence boost in my ability to become part of the academic community’. Estelle sums up everyone’s thoughts when she exclaims, ‘After a greatly interesting piece and some thought-provoking questions, nothing could have been more welcome than the vast amounts of coffee that was awaiting us in the refectory’.

As usual, coffee breaks provided some of the best opportunities to meet academics, network and discuss the conference so far. Joan focuses on her delight at meeting new people: ‘My favourite experience was meeting with a curator from Hampton Court Palace, currently working on a renovation and total reconstruction of a Georgian chocolate kitchen. Her experiences and views were radically different from those present specialising in critical theory, and her approach – focusing on art history – was refreshing and informative. She, like many others, provided multiple resources, connections, and networking opportunities’.

We all stayed together for the first parallel panel of the morning reconsidering the implications of eighteenth-century economic and civilizational theory. Carolyn Dougherty reread Adam Smith’s conception of enlightened self-interest in relation to the by and large pre-industrialized workforce of his eighteenth-century context, stressing the need for the performance of virtuous piety in order to guarantee credit-worthiness. James Smith presented on the Leavisite journal *Scrutiny*’s eighteenth-century, arguing that Leavis represents the century as one in which ‘something has gone wrong’ at the same time as its theories of civilization offered regenerative potential for his modern Waste Land. CJ describes how ‘I quickly found myself fascinated by the Leavises’ work and eager to investigate further over the summer’, although Estelle ‘began to feel intimidated by the faultless quality of work, coupled with a growing anxiety that our panel would be performed to an empty auditorium’. Lizzi, on the other hand, felt that ‘aside from the really interesting topics presented here, this panel was particularly beneficial to us as we could see exactly how our panel would work, and it gave us an opportunity to consider the sorts of questions that were asked by academics’. Dougherty and Smith, or rather Carolyn and James, became avid supporters of our Exeter delegation, encouraging and supporting my students’ experience of their first academic conference.

The next panel was ours. My students were excited and nervous, worrying over the contrasting possibilities that no one would come to see them and that some one would! In the event, our panel was well attended by about a third of the conference delegation, including one of the keynote speakers, Donna Landry, who offered the students detailed individual feedback after the panel. Unusually nervous myself, I introduced our first speaker, Joan Passey, who confidently explored the connections between eighteenth-century masquerade culture and twenty-first century pop culture, linking the disgust at female corporeality expressed in the poetry of Jonathan Swift to the self-consciously grotesque performances of Lady Gaga and Nicky Minaj. Joan’s presentation was supported by visually stunning imagery, which set the tone for a stimulating, thought-provoking and energetic set of papers. Next up was Lizzi Bowerman who compared the blurring of genres in Defoe’s representation of the real Alexander Selkirk’s experiences in *Robinson Crusoe* with today’s information overload. Her exploration of the mixture of journalism and fiction, history and allegory in Defoe’s novel made complex connections between eighteenth-century and twenty-first-century print cultures, and set up one of the overarching themes of our panel: the interdisciplinary interconnectivity of literature and culture. CJ Russett offered us an intellectually provocative reading of economic crisis, predicated on widespread ignorance, from the American Revolution to our own fiscal catastrophes, connecting Samuel Johnson’s writing on tax with today’s uproar about tax avoidance. Estelle Hakner interpreted Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* as a gothic exegesis of competing interpretations of the French Revolution, connecting her analysis of oppression, liberation and anarchy in the eighteenth century to the violence which perverted the reformist goals of 2010’s student protests. In her reading, the vandalism of the Conservative Party Headquarters becomes a gothic excrescence of mob mentality warping legitimate political goals. Finally, Chloe Statham gave a virtuoso reading of the links between history, fiction and historical fiction in Mary Wollstonecraft’s travelogue *Letters from Sweden* and Hilary Mantel’s *A Place of Greater Safety*, connecting the two texts through their focus on the performative nature of personality.

Describing her experience of the panel, Estelle ‘was shocked by a real sense of enjoyment whilst delivering my paper – probably some form of power rush! Furthermore, I was really impressed and touched by, firstly, the kind questions asked by those in the audience and, secondly, the lovely feedback given to us separately and as a panel. The fact that time was taken to consider how best we could improve our pieces, if we wished to take them further, really made us feel valued as undergraduates’. CJ admits ‘feeling slightly nervous as we watched as Andy called for questions from the audience. What followed was an interesting discussion including questions about the use (and usefulness) of ECCO and the very relevance of eighteenth-century studies to society. The academics were congratulatory about our presentations, and as we headed back to the refectory we were drawn into discussion with individual academics as each suggested ways we could further our papers’. Lizzi reports that ‘we all struggled to hide our glee when James Smith called us “terrifyingly professional” during the questions at the end!’ She also singles out Donna Landry who ‘praised us all highly and offered individual feedback and further reading suggestions to each of us’. Joan sums up the difficulties and opportunities offered by the task: ‘After we spoke, we were asked for our thoughts regarding ECCO, admitting that, while a fantastic opportunity to access documents we wouldn’t otherwise be able to, the keyword search needed to be streamlined to ensure its use as a functional research tool. However, the seemingly random nature of search results does often throw up documents we would never have stumbled upon ourselves – leading to the creation of most of our papers!’

Our panel then split up to explore their own interests, with some attending one on William Hogarth, historical fiction and slavery and others joining me in a surprisingly raucous panel on gender and romantic fiction. We heard a paper on romance, sadomasochism and academic feminism delivered in absentia, followed by one from Diana Webber on immersion narratives based on Jane Austen’s novels, with a thought-provoking final paper from Steve Van Hagen on post-feminist methods of rereading Lovelace’s wounded masculinity in Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*. This paper navigated the sensitive critical areas of eighteenth-century rake / rape culture with a challenging reading of the potential within post-feminism to critique destructive forms of manliness both then and now. Joan describes the sense of excitement to be had disagreeing with a speaker: ‘My notes disintegrated into madness as soon as Steve Van-Hagen's paper on postfeminism and Robert Lovelace introduced Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* as an example - while I disagree with Van-Hagen's assertion that Tyler Durden is representative of the fragmentation of the postfeminist man (I instead perceive it as a text more concerned with wider themes of cultural vacuity and existential anxiety, rather than one focused on gender) I found it thrilling to have Palahniuk's work academically recognised in such close quarters, and it gave much food for thought in regards to how masculine narratives have changed over the course of feminism’s evolution’.

CJ enthusiastically recommended the parallel panel: ‘After Lunch Chloe and I broke away from the rest of our contingent to attend a panel on Hogarth, slavery and the modern novel. This panel was the highlight of the weekend. We saw hugely different approaches to the topic from Adrian Knapp and Brycchan Carey and a focused paper by James Ward. Three extremely interesting papers led into a stimulating debate between Adrian and Brycchan over the work of David Dabydeen. Brycchan had attacked Dabydeen’s other pre-2007 slavery novels as being simplistic, mistake-ridden and generally under-researched. Adrian however felt that Dabydeen’s *A Harlot’s Progress* was a more complex work than Brycchan had acknowledged. The audience questions only served to further a debate which saw us overrun by almost 20 minutes’. Chloe, on the other hand, sided with Carey, enthusing that his ‘speech covered a genre which I love, but a era which I am unfamiliar, and as a result my notes from this talk are predominately comprised of a list of authors and titles which have subsequently found their way to my Amazon wish-list’.

That ended the academic aspect of the conference for the day, ushering in the evening arts festival, beginning with a musical recital, Bach to the Future, including a planted mobile phone interruption leading to its recovery by witty, classically trained musicians. The festival also included a one-woman play and an eye-opening fashion show, which reminded me again of Joan’s visually stunning presentation of grotesque masquerade. Joan herself enthuses about the combination of art and academia in the evening festival: ‘Astounded by this amalgamation of everything I love (wine, drag, and academia), I was rendered dazed as we were guided to ASK for a wonderful meal (and fiery debate over the important questions – The Man Who Stole the Earth: Nirvana or Bowie… or Lulu?) before being lead through York’s top watering holes…’. Chloe also found the conference dinner ‘almost as rewarding as the academic side, as I felt able to talk to academics on an equal and friendly level, which gives me hope that this is a field I could slot into as a personality as well as an academic’.

The second day of the conference began with an informative and illuminating discussion of the writings and travels of the seventeenth-century Sufi Dervish and gentleman adventurer Evlìya Çelebì by Donna Landry. Lizzi ‘particularly enjoyed this lecture as it was fascinating for me to learn about the less-known Ottoman traveller Evliya Celebi, as well as to hear of Professor Landry’s own efforts to help preserve his legacy as part of the “Evlìya Çelebì Way” project currently under development in Turkey. This lecture linked well with Professor Ellis’s keynote lecture the previous day, as it also placed an emphasis on sociability and “borderlessness”, though in this case, the boundaries traversed were geographical and facilitated by travel as opposed to social and facilitated by conversation’.

CJ enjoyed the next parallel panel on eighteenth-century satire: ‘The first paper was a discussion of the relationship between modern and eighteenth-century political caricature which once again drew in Hogarth. John Moores demonstrated the existence of a dialogue between the caricatures of the two eras highlighting the recycling of images, concepts and underlying themes. Daren Hodson then read possibly the most interesting paper of the weekend, positioning Pelleport’s*Les Bohemiens* as a satirical critique of philosophers and philosophy. He highlighted the tendency in the academy to focus on revolutionary French texts, rejecting texts that don’t add to that area of study. Daren demonstrated that such under-read and endangered texts are worthy of study; my copy is already in the post’. Estelle agreed, particularly enjoying the ‘visually engaging paper’ by John Moores who ‘**considered the extent to which modern caricature is influenced by the eighteenth century caricaturists and, after being prompted by a question from the audience, the extent to which they borrowed amongst their contemporaries, and how these visual depictions were sparked by Enlightenment thought’. Joan took away from the panel** ‘a key quotation from Martin Rowson, which stated “taking the piss is one of our most important protections against tyranny.” I seem to have highlighted this enough times to wear through the paper’.

Themes of travel and/or orientalism connected the rest of the panels I attended that day. I stayed for presentations on the eighteenth-century traveller whilst my students pursued the sexier subject of satire in a different room. They missed one of the best papers of the conference, a beautifully illustrated discussion of Hogarth’s representation of the problem of longitude in the last print of *The Rake’s Progress* and David Hockney’s appropriation of the distinctive cross-hatching design in his production of Stravinsky’s opera. Katy Barrett concluded that Hogarth depicted the quest to precisely measure our position in the world as lunatic, paradoxically underscoring our disorientation in the world, both then and now. Adriana Craciun presented on the ideological use of the relics from La Perouse’s doomed exploratory mission has been put to in French culture. Ruth Scobie finished the panel with an engaging look at Samuel Johnson’s position in celebrity culture then and now, finishing with an evocative consideration of history and fiction, which resonated with my students’ papers the previous day.

The final panel of the day saw a packed auditorium prepared for the conference organizer Adam Perchard’s punchy, playful, provocative, paper on the possibilities for an Islamic feminism in early eighteenth-century material untainted by later attempts to demonise Eastern oppression in favour of an idealised conception of Western liberation. Adam’s paper was ably supported by Jim Watt’s survey of eighteenth-century orientalism in the twenty-first century and Binoy Bhushan Agarwal’s searing critique of the colonial assumptions underpinning William Dalrymple’s *White Mughals*.

The conference concluded with a roundtable discussion which brought together the artistic and academic strands of the conference, whilst challenging the possibilities of creative and interpretative interpenetration in the period. We celebrated the inventive and imaginative handling of conference themes characterising the many and varied papers over the course of the two days, imagining a return to CECS for a kind of York biennale on the eighteenth century in the present day. Joan particularly enjoyed the contributions of ‘the editor of *Let Them Eat Cake* magazine, Ashley Maurtizen. Mauritzen was an intelligent, eloquent speaker – I particularly enjoyed what she said about the necessity of specialisation; the idea that in a ‘Jack of All Trades/Master of None’ culture specialisation is necessary to function, thus rendering collaboration essential for progression. The theme of collaboration between academics and artists was discussed further, leading me to wonder why the creation of a thesis, an argument, the original production of an analysis, isn’t more widely regarded as a creative act, or at the very least an engage participation in the arts. Literature, while a different form of art, is art nonetheless, and its study requires a necessary spark of creativity’. For me, one of the most interesting suggestions made in this plenary session came from Markman Ellis, obviously concerned about the bureaucratic and managerial pressures facing senior academics at the moment. He advocated a ‘negative’ impact case study, taking us beyond the popular book-TV crossover model, in which we could imagine provoking dissensus in the public sphere, challenging preconceptions and critiquing ingrained prejudice – an endeavour I would argue should form the cornerstone of an Enlightenment project which sees the lasting relevance of the eighteenth century in the present day.

In conclusion, the students’ thoughts on the whole experience:

Joan: I left with an appreciation for where academic study has come from, and the direction it is moving to, as well as a handbag full of finger sandwiches, and a reading list longer than many of the papers presented! The experience was enriching and educational, with each paper pointing me in a new, fresh direction for further research. The academics were encouraging – even live tweeting our entire panel! – and willing to speak with us again about progressing our work and our careers. Many of them were eager to speak at Cornwall Campus (some had already!), and if anything I hope we represented our course’s diversity of interests, strength of research, and emphasis on presentation and originality.

Lizzi: I think I can speak for all of us when I say that we left feeling really proud of ourselves and eager to do more research and writing - this was a fantastic opportunity for us and we all thoroughly enjoyed it.I would like to conclude my report with a thank you to Andy McInnes, without whom the trip would not have been possible; his organization and encouragement made our panel the success it was.

CJ: The end of the conference marked the end of one of what I believe will a key formative moment in my academic life. The passion and friendliness demonstrated by the academics was inspiring, and I hope to be there if this conference does return as planned in 2015.

Estelle: **In total, the weekend was an incredibly rewarding combination of intellectual feasting, brilliant entertainment, and fantastically welcoming company. It was great to have this experience as an undergraduate as it confirmed my ambition to continue along the academic career path, whilst observing the exceptional quality of work that is expected. I cannot wait to encounter another conference and continue to build up some experience in the academic world.**

Chloe: Not only has the conference given me immediate help with dissertation research and MA programs, but it has also solidified in me a desire to become an academic. The conference, Andy, and the academics I have met, have inspired me more that I can express in this report.