

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



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The Poly-Olbion Project / The Children's Poly-Olbion. Other

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Volume 44, Number 1, Winter 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081147ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37051>

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Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Logan, S. (2021). Review of [McRae, Andrew, and Philip Schwizer, project dirs., gen. eds. The Poly-Olbion Project / The Children's Poly-Olbion. Other]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 44(1), 174–179.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37051>

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Exeter, UK: Exeter University, 2013. Accessed 22 June 2020.

poly-olbion.exeter.ac.uk / childrenspoly-olbion.exeter.ac.uk.

The Poly-Olbion Project is a celebration of the work of Michael Drayton, one of the most prolific writers of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. He produced numerous lengthy poetic projects between 1590 and 1597. In 1598, he undertook a monumental new project, one deemed a “Herculean labour” by his friends, which would occupy his energy for the next two decades—*Poly-Olbion, or A Chorographically Description of Tracts, Rivers, Mountains, Forests, and other Parts of this renowned Isle of Great Britaine*. Part 1, comprising eighteen “Songs,” was published in 1613, and part 2, comprising twelve “Songs,” was published in 1622. The two parts together offer readers nearly fifteen thousand alexandrine lines. Although this poem was a colossal undertaking, Drayton’s writing career was far from over with its completion. He went on to publish a collection of poetic works in 1627, and another—his last—in 1630. There was no edition of his complete works in his lifetime. His poems appeared in a folio and a quarto edition in the eighteenth century; an edition of selected works appeared in 1883; various editions of his published collections, and at least one gathering of selected poems, appeared in the twentieth century; a three-volume *Poly-Olbion* was published by The Spenser Society in 1889–90¹; and a complete works, edited by J. William Hebel, K. Tillotson and B. H. Newdigate, was published by B. Blackwell in five volumes in 1931–41 and revised in 1961. Hebel used Newdigate’s 1922 copy of *Poly-Olbion* as his main source.² Volume 4 of this edition contains the text of the poem, original marginal comments, John Selden’s “Illustrations,” and the maps. Textual notes, the collation of textual variants, as well as an index, are included in volume 5. For most scholars, *Poly-Olbion* has been accessible primarily through this Hebel edition.

That has changed in the era of Early English Books Online (EEBO, eebo.chadwyck.com), through which the 1612/13 edition can be accessed online in its original published format, and through the Text Creation Partnership

1. Michael Drayton, *Poly-Olbion* (Manchester: C. E. Simms for The Spenser Society, 1889–90).

2. Michael Drayton, *The Works of Michael Drayton*, ed. Bernard H. (Bernard Henry) Newdigate, Kathleen Mary Tillotson, and John William Hebel (Oxford: Printed at the Shakespeare Head Press and published for the press by B. Blackwell, 1931–41; revised 1961, n.d.).

(TCP), in transcription. Anyone with access to EEBO can engage with this digital edition, but of course, that access is licensed and generally available only through institutions. The Poly-Olbion Project offers what I believe is the only open-access full text of the poem, through a website hosted by the University of Exeter, UK. Like the seventeenth-century editions, this online text is not annotated, although it is clear that the project developers hope to offer a full, modern scholarly edition of this text in both hard copy and digital formats at some point.

The Poly-Olbion Project is not limited to this online text, however. Beyond creating this very useful preliminary digital edition, the project developers, Andrew McRae and Philip Schwizer of the University of Exeter, partnered with The Geographical Society of London and Flash of Splendour, a UK nonprofit organization that works to empower special needs, marginalized, and disadvantaged children and young people through music, theatre, film, art, and creative writing. Through these partnerships, the developers brought scholars and special needs children together for a conference on the poem and an art exhibition, The Faerie-Land Exhibition (childrenspoly-olbion.exeter.ac.uk/the-faerie-land). The exhibition, featuring the visual, poetic, and musical art of the Flash of Splendour youths, as well of professional artists who worked with them, took place in September 2015, toured to several other sites, and was installed for an extended period at the University of Exeter Forum. The 2015 conference, which brought together international scholars of the poem, resulted in an edited collection, *Poly-Olbion: New Perspectives*, and a special edition of *The Seventeenth Century*, both of which present significant recent scholarship on the poem. Thus, The Poly-Olbion Project is a multi-media endeavour, one aspect of which is a website anticipating and documenting various kinds of scholarly and creative work around the poem, as well as providing resources for those interested in engaging with this sometimes daunting early modern text. The purpose of this review is to evaluate the usability of that website and the effectiveness of the project as a whole and in its various parts.

Overview of the website

The Poly-Olbion Project's website is attractively laid out and easy to navigate. It has both expected and unexpected features. The website and digital resources are clearly only one aspect of a project whose overall goals are to make

Drayton's chorographic poem available and accessible to a broader audience; to use it as a basis for outreach into marginalized communities; and to forge meaningful and fruitful collaborations across academic and non-academic groups. The website's home page emphasizes that the project's central aim is to produce a full scholarly edition of the text for print and digital publication—a much-needed resource that apparently has not yet been completed. I was unable to ascertain whether it is still in the works. Additionally, the home page features a brief overview of the project's multiple aims and outcomes. It offers a brief description of the poem and its elements, and highlights some of the important collaborations mentioned above. There are in-text links to the Flash of Splendour website (flashofsplendourarts.com), as well as to a sub-website devoted to their contributions to the collaboration, called *The Children's Poly-Olbion*. Additionally, the home page includes a twitter feed, sidebar images, and links to supporting materials related to the poem. One minor quibble here is that most links throughout the site open in the current window, so one must navigate back to the original page after clicking. My personal preference is for such links to open in a new window.

The other main tabs are "About," "Interpretation," "The Texts," "The Children's Poly-Olbion," "The Maps," and "Blog." The "About" page provides some of the history of the development of the project and offers links to bios of each of the four developers, although the links to the two research fellows lead to the general staff page at the University of Exeter's Department of English, and neither of them is listed there. The "Interpretation" page was apparently last updated shortly after the 2015 conference, and projects the publication of the special issue (2018) and the edited collection (2020). Links to these two essay collections would be useful here. This page also reiterates the need for a scholarly edition of the text. The other main navigation links offer a great deal more substance and comprise the most useful aspects of this website.

"The Texts": For scholars, this is the heart of the website. The drop-down menu from this tab offers four sub-pages: "Scholarly Edition," which describes the important aspects of that developing edition; "Extracts," which provides six extracts from the text, with brief introductory comments; "The Words of Poly-Olbion," which offers a glossary of unique words and neologisms in the text—a fantastic resource that includes the words in context, definitions, and discussion of the way the words are used; and "Full Text," which provides a table of contents (TOC) for the thirty songs of the poem, with clickable links that

lead to each song's full text. As noted above, this is an unannotated edition, so it is not significantly different from the Hebel text in volume 4 of *The Complete Works*. As expressed in several places on this site, a full scholarly edition would be a great boon, especially if it could be made available as an open source. In the meantime, this online edition fills an important niche. It feels stylistically very close to the Hebel edition, similar in its layout, font, and other aspects of the reading experience, although it differs in its page numbering. Its greatest value lies in its digital accessibility and line-numbering, which uses increments of five rather than the ten-line increments of the Hebel text, making the text more easily trackable. The song texts are navigable through "Next" and "Previous" buttons, which move the reader from page to page, but there is no other form of navigation available; it is not possible to search for a term, jump to a particular page or line, etc. The digital structure is thus quite basic, but functional in what it provides.

One unfortunate omission in the presentation of the poem is that the maps are not presented in their original locations in the text, preceding each song. Instead, they are accessible only through "The Maps" tab and page, and so one must take the trouble to navigate there and open a new window in order to have them at hand while reading.

When one navigates to "The Maps" page, there are three maps rotating within a window, with pop-up text identifying each by county and indicating that the image is from the Folger Shakespeare Library (FSL). These three maps are not identified with the songs they are associated with, which would have been helpful. It would also help to have the full set of maps here, but perhaps the designers thought there was no reason to duplicate an already existing resource. In my view, having the maps directly on this website would be a benefit to researchers, and perhaps even more to casual readers. Minimally, having a link to the appropriate map at the beginning of each song, or in the TOC before each song, would simplify navigation and access significantly. As it stands, the maps are linked to the FSL image set of *Poly-Olbion* maps, which pops up seamlessly in a new window. Unfortunately, the FSL maps are not labelled by or associated with their corresponding songs, and sorting through them to determine those associations is cumbersome. This is not the fault of the Poly-Olbion Project developers, but it does suggest that they might want to develop a more effective digital means to access the maps directly in relation to the songs in the poem.

“The Maps” page also includes some limited information about the maps and about their creator, William Hole. There are links to digital holdings of contemporaneous mapping projects: Saxton’s *Atlas of England and Wales* (1579) and Speed’s *Theatre of the Empire of Great Britain* (1611). Both links work, but the sites they take you to are not currently providing access to those map sets—again, this is not the fault of the Poly-Olbion Project developers, but an unfortunate inconvenience for those interested in exploring such connections.

The “Blog” page offers links to a number of short research pieces on the poem, some of them relating the poem to recent events such as Brexit or the Scottish vote on independence. The blog is not highly active, with one or two posts per year through 2019, and a few comments. Nevertheless, it offers interesting insights on the poem and highlights its ongoing significance.

The Children’s Poly-Olbion project

The Children’s Poly-Olbion project (childrenspoly-olbion.exeter.ac.uk) is, apparently, a separately developed, linked website, with a distinct format and navigational structure. I think it is important to recognize the depth and value of this partnership between academia and the community. It models a kind of expansive thinking that puts academics in touch with forms of engagement beyond a typical professional purview. What was accomplished through this partnership is clearly evinced on this associated website. The tabs on this site are “Drayton’s Poly-olbion,” “Children’s Poly-olbion,” “The Faerie Land Exhibition,” “Educational Outreach,” and “Press and Media.”

Although this site is not directed primarily at scholars, it offers a rich introduction to Drayton, his collaborators, his poem, and his historical context. The drop-down menu under “Drayton’s Poly-olbion” includes pages on “Michael Drayton,” “John Selden,” “William Hole,” “Extracts and Full Text,” and “Further Reading.” Each of these provides a substantial commentary, with sub-pages providing details on each of the main contributors and their work. The organization facilitates exploration. The “Maps” link under William Hole’s drop-down menu provides a set of six beautifully-coloured map details, four from the 1612 edition and two from the 1622 edition. The whole set of maps is not provided or linked here; the “Extracts and Full Text” link takes you to a page where you can click to go to The Poly-Olbion Project site’s full text page and TOC.

Other than this tab, the majority of The Children's Poly-Olbion website is devoted to the community engagement aspects of this partnership. The "Children's Poly-olbion" tab offers a dropdown menu that links to pages about the project; about Flash of Splendour, an organization promoting the use of complex literature and art to unlock the creative capacities of special needs children; about the partnership schools and the different aspects of the project that were developed in each; and about the other partners supporting this project. Under "The Faerie Land Exhibition" tab, some of the links are not up to date: "Visiting" takes you to information on the exhibits that took place in 2015–16; the "Exhibition Catalogue Online" is "Coming soon"; the "Exhibition Reviews" are guest-book and twitter raves; and the "Shop" is closed. Nevertheless, the two truly functional tabs provide a rich sense of what this project accomplished: a short video plus images of the artworks produced by the children, and commentaries by the four professional artists who participated in the project and displayed work at the exhibits alongside the work of these children. The evidence of this project's impact is powerful and inspirational, and that alone makes this part of the site worth visiting.

Although it seems clear that neither site is being maintained actively, each has a great deal to offer, and each remains reasonably functional. Some relatively small efforts would increase accessibility and navigability, enhancing the overall user experience, but even as it stands this online resource is a boon for researchers working on the poem, scholars considering how to forge community partnerships, and members of the general public who are interested in poetry, art, special education, and history and geography. I recommend making a visit!

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<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37051>