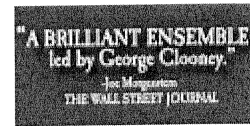


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# Books and Other Fetish Objects

By **JAMES GLEICK**

I GOT a real thrill in December 1999 in the Reading Room of the Morgan Library in New York when the librarian, Sylvie Merian, brought me, after I had completed an application with a letter of reference and a photo ID, the first, oldest notebook of Isaac Newton. First I was required to study a microfilm version. There followed a certain amount of appropriate pomp. The notebook was lifted from a blue cloth drop-spine box and laid on a special padded stand. I was struck by how impossibly tiny it was — 58 leaves bound in vellum, just 2 3/4 inches wide, half the size I would have guessed from the enlarged microfilm images. There was his name, “Isacus Newton,” proudly inscribed by the 17-year-old with his quill, and the date, 1659.

“He filled the pages with meticulous script, the letters and numerals often less than one-sixteenth of an inch high,” I wrote in my book “Isaac Newton” a few years later. “He began at both ends and worked toward the middle.”

Apparently historians know the feeling well — the exhilaration that comes from handling the venerable original. It’s a contact high. In this time of digitization, it is said to be endangered. The Morgan Notebook of Isaac Newton is online now (thanks to the Newton Project at the University of Sussex). You can surf it.

The raw material of history appears to be heading for the cloud. What once was hard is now easy. What was slow is now fast.

Is this a case of “be careful what you wish for”?

Last month the British Library announced a project with Google to digitize 40 million pages of books, pamphlets and periodicals dating to the French Revolution. The European Digital Library, Europeana.eu, well surpassed its initial goal of 10 million “objects” last year, including a Bulgarian parchment manuscript from 1221 and the Rok runestone from Sweden, circa 800, which will save you trips to, respectively, the St. Cyril and St. Methodius National Library in Sofia and a church in Ostergotland.

Reporting to the European Union in Brussels, the Comité des Sages (sounds better than “Reflection Group”) urged in January that essentially everything — all the out-of-copyright cultural heritage of all the member states — should be digitized and made freely available online. It put the cost at approximately \$140 billion and called this vision “The New Renaissance.”

Inevitably comes the backlash. Where some see enrichment, others see impoverishment. Tristram Hunt, an English historian and member of Parliament, complained in *The Observer* this month that “techno-enthusiasm” threatens to cheapen scholarship. “When everything is downloadable, the mystery of history can be lost,” he wrote. “It is only with MS in hand that the real meaning of the text becomes apparent: its rhythms and cadences, the relationship of image to word, the passion of the argument or cold logic of the case.”

I’m not buying this. I think it’s sentimentalism, and even fetishization. It’s related to the fancy that what one loves about books is the grain of paper and the scent of glue.

Some of the qualms about digital research reflect a feeling that anything obtained too easily loses its value. What we work for, we better appreciate. If an amateur can be beamed to the top of Mount Everest, will the view be as magnificent as for someone who has accomplished the climb? Maybe not, because magnificence is subjective. But it’s the same view.

Another worry is the loss of serendipity — as Mr. Hunt says, “the scholar’s eternal hope that something will catch his eye.” When you open a book Newton once owned, which you can do (by appointment) in the library of Trinity College, Cambridge, you may see notes he scribbled in the margins. But marginalia are being digitized, too. And I find that online discovery leads to unexpected twists and turns of research at least as often as the same time spent in archives.

“New Renaissance” may be a bit of hype, but a profound transformation lies ahead for the practice of history. Europeans seem to have taken the lead in creating digital showcases; maybe they just have more history to work with than Americans do. One brilliant new resource among many is the London Lives project: 240,000 manuscript and printed pages dating to 1690, focusing on the poor, including parish archives, records from workhouses and hospitals, and trial proceedings from the Old Bailey.

Storehouses like these, open to anyone, will surely inspire new scholarship. They enrich cyberspace, particularly because without them the online perspective is so foreshortened, so locked into the present day. Not that historians should retire to their computer terminals; the sights and smells of history, where we can still find them, are to be cherished. But the

artifact is hardly a clear window onto the past; a window, yes, clouded and smudged like all the rest.

It's a mistake to deprecate digital images just because they are suddenly everywhere, reproduced so effortlessly. We're in the habit of associating value with scarcity, but the digital world unlinks them. You can be the sole owner of a Jackson Pollock or a Blue Mauritius but not of a piece of information — not for long, anyway. Nor is obscurity a virtue. A hidden parchment page enters the light when it molts into a digital simulacrum. It was never the parchment that mattered.

Oddly, for collectors of antiquities, the pricing of informational relics seems undiminished by cheap reproduction — maybe just the opposite. In a Sotheby's auction three years ago, Magna Carta fetched a record \$21 million. To be exact, the venerable item was a copy of Magna Carta, made 82 years after the first version was written and sealed at Runnymede. Why is this tattered parchment valuable? Magical thinking. It is a talisman. The precious item is a trick of the eye. The real Magna Carta, the great charter of human rights and liberty, is available free online, where it is safely preserved. It cannot be lost or destroyed.

An object like this — a talisman — is like the coffin at a funeral. It deserves to be honored, but the soul has moved on.

*James Gleick is the author of "The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood."*