

LIFE AFTER ACADEMIA: ALTERNATIVE CAREER PATHS FOR PERIODICAL SCHOLARS

2024 Research Society for Victorian Periodicals Conference, “Place in the Victorian Press”

This document is a resource for Graduate Researchers and Independent Periodical Scholars (GRIPS). It was kindly put together by the four panelists of the lunchtime professionalization session “Life After Academia: Alternative Career Paths for Periodical Scholars” during the 2024 Research Society for Victorian Periodicals (RSVP) Conference on “Place in the Victorian Press”, hosted at the University of Stirling. This panel was organized by two of RSVP’s graduate representatives, Matthew Stephens (Edge Hill University) and Marion Tempest Grant (York University).



Above: The speakers for the “Life after Academia” panel at the 2024 conference. From left to right: Elizabeth Fraser (Edinburgh University Press), Beth Gaskell (British Library), Mila Daskalova (National Library of Scotland), and Marie Léger-St-Jean (freelancer).

This document will be of benefit to anyone interested in exploring future career prospects related to periodical studies outside of traditional educational institutions. It discusses the current UK job market, offers insights from the panelists’ career trajectories, and covers strategies for those looking to give themselves an edge in the job market.

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RESOURCE MANAGEMENT/ LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES CAREERS

Mila Daskalova

Rights and Provenance Officer, National Library of Scotland

Biographical Statement: Dr Mila Daskalova is the Rights and Provenance Officer of the National Library of Scotland. She completed her PhD on periodicals published in Victorian asylums at the University of Strathclyde in 2022 and a SGSAH Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of Glasgow (2023). She has a Masters degree in Book History and Material Culture (2017) and has contributed to the expansion of both the Curran Index of the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals and the AHRC-funded 'Piston, Pen and Press' database.

- 1. Please tell us about your current job and the professional journey to that position, including any relevant education (i.e. graduate education or certificates), professional or volunteer experience.**

I started working as a Rights and Provenance Officer in November 2023. When it was advertised, the job was a new and unique position aimed at improving access to the library collections through copyright clearance and research into the provenance of deposited collections (that is, collections that have been given to the library temporarily and whose current owners are often unknown or unreachable). Since I started, the department has undergone a major restructuring, and I am now the library's main copyright consultant. The job involves quite a lot of research, as I try to identify and contact rights holders and owners of deposits, as well as interpretation and application of legal guidance and institutional policy, collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders within and beyond the library, and risk assessment.

My career path to date has involved parallel activities in academia and the heritage sector. After completing my undergraduate degree in English Literature in 2016, I enrolled in the MSc Book History and Material Culture programme, which was CILIP accredited and introduced me to library science, the advantages and challenges of digitisation, and the management of heritage collections. As part of it, I got a one-semester placement at the National Library of Scotland, working in the Rare Books Department. Since then, I have worked on various other projects as a volunteer or a paid intern in different heritage institutions in Edinburgh (New College Library of the University of Edinburgh, Advocates Library, Lothian Health Services Archive, Anatomical Museum and the National Library of Scotland). Some of that work continued during the first years of my PhD. The experience gave me a solid understanding of the operations of cultural heritage institutions.

In addition, I used my PhD to develop several side projects. I ran a research blog, organised a practical printing workshop, and launched a mental health themed magazine in Bulgaria. I also sought additional training (e.g. coding with R) and research assistant jobs that further expanded my skillset. I worked with another PhD student in producing the index to a scholarly monograph, helped with conference and workshop organisation, and contributed to online databases. Alongside my expertise in navigating online databases and working with archives and special collections (acquired directly through my PhD research), this experience was helpful in securing first a job as a Special Collections Assistant at the National Library of

LIFE AFTER ACADEMIA: ALTERNATIVE CAREER PATHS FOR PERIODICAL SCHOLARS

2024 Research Society for Victorian Periodicals Conference, “Place in the Victorian Press”

Scotland soon after completing my PhD and then my current position as a Rights and Provenance Officer. My research, project management, collaboration, and database management skills emerged as particularly valuable assets during the application process for the job.

2. Did you consider alternate careers during your education?

Totally. I have sustained a keen interest in the cultural heritage sector since my master’s degree and started my PhD hoping that it would prepare me both for academia and working in cultural institutions. I have applied for jobs in libraries and archives both after my PhD and the postdoc. However, when I started my job hunt after the postdoc last autumn, I was open to anything vaguely related to research, publishing, and mental health (the subject of my PhD). While drafting academic applications, I have also applied for a wide range of non-academic positions: editorial assistant, an engagement and marketing position at a mental health charity, an events coordinator at a university’s research support office, and heritage jobs of various nature.

3. What advice would you give to periodicals/nineteenth-century scholars who might want to pursue your career path?

Keep in mind that this is quite a challenging time for the heritage sector. Part-time and fixed-term contracts are widespread, which might not offer a lot of security, at least in the beginning. Competition is also high. At the same time, once you have your foot in the door and people know you and what you can offer, it gets a bit easier to find new and better opportunities.

A library studies degree is useful, but working in a library can mean many things. Some roles do not involve direct work with the collections at all and might not require specialist training (e.g. marketing, public engagement, data protection, digital content, etc). Different library roles require very different skills, so you should think about how you can make yourself a stronger candidate for the particular area of library work that you’d be interested in. Volunteering and getting some practical experience and, if appropriate, relevant training will allow you to identify such areas of interest and gain the skills and knowledge you need to perform well.

It is also good to remember that nineteenth century and periodical studies have close connections with the present moment. They engage with themes of persistent relevance (e.g., identity, community, social networks, globalisation, and power imbalances) and require continuous engagement with the digital (through online databases, digitised collections and computational approaches to exploring the past). Depending on your research topic, you might identify particular aspects of human experience that interest you and seek opportunities that resonate with that. In recent years, libraries and archives have made marked efforts to address marginalisation and misrepresentation of certain communities’ history and heritage, to disseminate their collections online, and to promote digital scholarship. These developments might align well with the expertise and skillsets developed during your PhD in periodicals/nineteenth-century studies.

LIFE AFTER ACADEMIA: ALTERNATIVE CAREER PATHS FOR PERIODICAL SCHOLARS

2024 Research Society for Victorian Periodicals Conference, "Place in the Victorian Press"

4. Please share any thoughts you have on the current job market for researchers/ scholars in the United Kingdom.

The market is tough, but I firmly believe that, if you keep an open mind and keep trying, the right opportunity will find you. Academic positions are extremely competitive, especially in the humanities, so it's good to have a plan B (and even a plan C!). Depending on your circumstances, you might have to do a bit of job hopping to support yourself until you land the job that will feel just right.

Start to think about careers that might interest you and what is important to you as soon as possible. How important is money? Would you feel happy with a job that pays less but is more closely aligned with your interests and the causes you care about? Would you mind relocating for a job (and what's the farthest you'd go)? Are you comfortable juggling multiple part-time commitments? Do you prefer working independently, leading a team, or supporting others within a team? There are no wrong answers to these questions and answering them might give you some ideas about what you are looking for, where to seek it and how to get it. The PhD is an excellent time to try new things, build connections and networks within and beyond academic contexts, and develop new skills. Curiosity and creativity are invaluable assets, and as a PhD student, you have plenty of both! Use them to explore interests that would otherwise lie dormant and prepare yourself for what comes next.

LIFE AFTER ACADEMIA: ALTERNATIVE CAREER PATHS FOR PERIODICAL SCHOLARS

2024 Research Society for Victorian Periodicals Conference, “Place in the Victorian Press”

PUBLISHING CAREERS

Elizabeth Fraser

Senior Assistant Editor for Literary Studies, Edinburgh University Press

Biographical Statement: Elizabeth Fraser (she/her) completed an undergraduate degree in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh and then a master’s in Postcolonial Studies at the University of Kent. Since graduating she has worked in non-fiction publishing and she is currently Senior Assistant Editor for Literary Studies at Edinburgh University Press.

- 1. Please tell us about your current job and the professional journey to that position, including any relevant education (i.e. graduate education or certificates), professional or volunteer experience.**

I’ll disclose first that I’m not a periodicals scholar myself but periodicals scholars could potentially follow the same kind of path into publishing!

I’ve been working at Edinburgh University Press for a year and a half. I am based in the editorial department for books and my current job title is Senior Assistant Editor for Literary Studies. The main responsibilities that come with this job in academic publishing are coordinating the peer-review process for book proposals, drawing up contracts for newly approved books, answering queries while authors write their books, making sure final manuscripts are in order before books go into production, and sourcing endorsements for books being published soon.

My current job is my third job overall in non-fiction publishing. For my first job out of university, I was Publishing Intern at a publishing services provider called Prepress Projects in Perth. At this job I worked in production, proofreading journal articles and reports for organisations such as the National Institute for Health Research, the Royal Society, the UN and the Irish Environmental Protection Agency. For my second job, I then worked as a Programming, Communications and Publications Assistant at an environmental arts organisation in Edinburgh. In this role I worked with books but more on the sales and marketing side, shipping out orders and promoting their publications through social media and email blasts. This means I’ve had a go at most of the main publishing departments in my professional journey so far: editorial, production, marketing and sales.

In terms of relevant education or volunteer experience – unlike a lot of people who work in the publishing industry today, I didn’t do a postgraduate degree in publishing itself. I instead did an MA in Postcolonial Studies at the University of Kent. Nevertheless, the Postcolonial Studies course I did was based within a Literary Studies department and I had volunteered as an editor of the University of Kent’s Literary Studies journal, so when I was interviewed for Assistant Editor for Literary Studies I was able to talk about that. At undergraduate level, I had volunteered as a peer proofreader for students with English as a second language, as well as a language mentor for recently arrived Syrian refugees through an organisation called LinkNet in Edinburgh. I had also done quite a bit of administrative work for museums. These were all experiences I could draw on when interviewing for publishing jobs later.

LIFE AFTER ACADEMIA: ALTERNATIVE CAREER PATHS FOR PERIODICAL SCHOLARS

2024 Research Society for Victorian Periodicals Conference, “Place in the Victorian Press”

2. Did you consider alternate careers during your education?

Absolutely – to be honest I hadn’t considered publishing much at all and only applied to the internship in Perth on a whim because I was stuck at home in the Covid-19 lockdown and had nothing else to do. When I was an undergraduate student I either wanted to be an academic or to work in museums or the heritage sector in some way. Because I hadn’t studied English Literature or publishing itself, I had the false idea that the publishing industry wasn’t something that would be open to me.

However, I think it actually worked in my favour not to have this exact experience and not to have followed the conventional Literature-undergraduate-to-Publishing-master’s pipeline. Publishing is a competitive and oversubscribed industry and a lot of applicants’ CVs look the same, having done the same publishing courses, work placements and volunteering roles. Therefore, it can sometimes be beneficial to have had a ‘squiggly career’ cutting across different fields and industries. The people who interviewed me for my publishing jobs were as interested in my degree in Postcolonial Studies and work experience in museums as they were in my editorial experience, so having that different angle perhaps helped my CV stand out originally and then provided talking points at the interview where I could demonstrate transferable administrative and customer service skills. Overall, I’d definitely emphasise that it isn’t necessary to do a publishing master’s degree to get into publishing, so don’t feel pressured to unless it is something you want to study.

3. What advice would you give to periodicals/nineteenth-century scholars who might want to pursue your career path?

As I’ve said above, publishing is unfortunately very competitive and supposedly ‘entry-level’ jobs may actually ask for considerable experience already. For this reason, I would see if you can gain publishing-related skills while you are still studying or employed in academia. Most obviously, is there any work you could do for academic journals in your field, such as sitting on an ECR editorial board or copy editing and proofreading articles? If not that, could you write the copy for departmental newsletters or run the social media for your society or school? Getting involved with organising events or conferences would give you the experience that our marketing department would look for in job candidates too.

I would also highly recommend getting any kind of administrative experience. A lot of publishing is admin so proving that you have at least a basic understanding of Microsoft Excel and can learn new computer systems quickly will help. Generally, time-management and organisation are key traits for publishing jobs so make sure you are emphasising these in your cover letters.

Like what I did at undergraduate, you might also like to look into language-related volunteering opportunities, such as tutoring people with English as a second language. If you do want to try and find conventional publishing volunteering or work placements, I would just warn you to be wary of unpaid internships that may exploit your labour and not teach you much in the long run.

LIFE AFTER ACADEMIA: ALTERNATIVE CAREER PATHS FOR PERIODICAL SCHOLARS

2024 Research Society for Victorian Periodicals Conference, "Place in the Victorian Press"

Finally, I would say be flexible in terms of the areas of publishing you are willing to enter. When most people in the UK think of publishing, they imagine working in editorial in fiction publishing in London. However, there are many departments beyond editorial (production, marketing, sales, rights, finance); many publishing companies outside of London; and don't forget about non-fiction publishing, whether that's trade publishing for the kinds of non-fiction books you'd see in Waterstones or more niche academic publishing for specialist books and journals. If applying to academic publishing jobs, don't be put off by starting on a list that isn't your degree background – for example, at Edinburgh University Press there are Assistant Editors who studied English Literature that now work on our Philosophy or Politics lists no problem at all. You don't have to have studied the subject and there's usually something to interest you within that area even if you don't know the field super well in the beginning. Beyond publishing houses, remember as well that there are also companies called 'publishing services providers' where they don't publish books themselves but other organisations commission certain publishing tasks from them. There may be scope for remote work with these companies too.

4. Please share any thoughts you have on the current job market for researchers/ scholars in the United Kingdom.

I work with academics on a daily basis, both early career and established, and the academic job market certainly seems tough. The threats of redundancies at universities are deeply sad to see and they are having a destabilising impact on our authors, who often struggle to find the time to work on their books while trying to secure new employment or worrying about future job security. I can understand why periodicals scholars might want to explore the non-academic job market and I have a lot of trust in the transferable skills that researchers develop during their time in academia. I think if you can keep building these and make sure to provide evidence of them in your cover letters if applying to non-academic jobs, you have great chances moving into new industries.

You may feel a little discouraged if it turns out that you don't get to work in your immediate area of interest or absolute dream career straight away, but definitely keep an open mind as I've found that there is usually some aspect of the job that you can relate back to what you are passionate about and feel is worthwhile. For example, joining a Literary Studies list after a Postcolonial Studies degree, I myself was not an expert in Shakespeare by any means but I love reading the monographs our authors are writing about how Shakespeare plays have been adapted in different ways by marginalised communities around the world, including in postcolonial nations. I find it really fulfilling and relevant to my studies even though I didn't necessarily expect this for my job and I hope that would be the case for you, if you do decide to pursue jobs outside of academia.

LIFE AFTER ACADEMIA: ALTERNATIVE CAREER PATHS FOR PERIODICAL SCHOLARS

2024 Research Society for Victorian Periodicals Conference, "Place in the Victorian Press"

CURATORIAL/ LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES CAREERS

Beth Gaskell

Lead Curator of News & Moving Image, British Library

Biographical Statement: Beth Gaskell is Lead Curator of News & Moving Image at the British Library. She has a PhD focused on periodicals studies as well as a professional library qualification, and has worked in a wide range of GLAM institutions, including research libraries, museums, think tanks and learned societies.

1. Please tell us about your current job and the professional journey to that position, including any relevant education (i.e. graduate education or certificates), professional or volunteer experience.

I have been in my current role, as Lead Curator of News & Moving Image at the British Library, since May 2023. I manage a team that curates the library's collections of newspapers, radio and moving images, and work closely with other collections such as the web archive for web news, and with periodicals (which are seen as distinct by the British Library). My work involves overseeing digitisation, answering high level enquiries, working with and supporting research projects, working on exhibitions and publications, researching our collections and making that research available to the public, outreach and social media, acquisitions, management, and some cataloguing. I joined the Library in 2017 on a temporary contract working on a research and digitisation project, and was then made permanent as Curator of Newspaper Collections in 2021. So altogether I have worked at the library for about 7.5 years, and have held 3 positions (so far!)

I must be honest and say that I qualified as a Librarian and worked for a number of years before I did my PhD, so my career path might be slightly backwards for those looking at libraries after following the academic path. My undergraduate degree was in English Literature and History, and I then completed a one year library traineeship at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies before doing my MA in Library and Information Studies. I have since worked in a wide range of libraries and heritage organisations, including the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, Senate House Library, the National Army Museum, the Institutional Institute for Strategic Studies, and the Royal Astronomical Society. I also spent 18 months working in a secondary school library. I worked part-time in libraries while doing both my MA and PhD, and actually started my first role at the British Library while still writing up my PhD thesis.

2. Did you consider alternate careers during your education?

Yes. I seriously considered teaching in secondary schools when I finished my undergraduate degree, and again while I was working in the school library. I have also spent short periods working in university administration and in online publishing.

LIFE AFTER ACADEMIA: ALTERNATIVE CAREER PATHS FOR PERIODICAL SCHOLARS

2024 Research Society for Victorian Periodicals Conference, "Place in the Victorian Press"

It took me a while to decide whether I wanted to do the MA in Library and Information Studies or to do the Archives MA instead. Doing the library traineeship was instrumental in helping me know that libraries was the right direction for me.

3. What advice would you give to periodicals/nineteenth-century scholars who might want to pursue your career path?

Get experience where you can. This may be volunteering, it may be internships or traineeships, or it may be getting part time work while you study (shelving jobs are surprisingly satisfying). Not only does this make you more employable, it will help you know if working in a library is really what you want to do. It will also open your eyes to the wide range of jobs available at libraries, many of which are not so obvious to those outside the sector. Also, for some of the MA courses in the library studies you have to have proven work experience (UCL for example requires you to have worked in libraries for at least a year).

The library MA is not essential, but there can be a glass ceiling you hit without it in some sectors - particularly in academic libraries. There are positions available without the qualification, but they are more limited, usually require very specific specialist knowledge or skills, or require you to have a great deal of experience in specific areas of library work. Having said that, right now lots of libraries are very keen for candidates who have experiences/skills in data or database management, and/or who have digital research skills.

4. Please share any thoughts you have on the current job market for researchers/ scholars in the United Kingdom.

The job market right now isn't great. There has been prolonged underinvestment in the sector, and this has led to job cuts and low wages in many places. In the past I would have said that there was a great deal of competition for roles, but I think currently that the wages are so low that it is less so. There are also lots of roles that come up as fixed term contracts working on projects, which can be a good route into the sector. So it is a bit of a mixed picture.

Those coming out of PhD programmes do have a lot of transferable skills that the library sector find useful, such as outreach and presentation skills, research skills, data management, and project management. The key thing is to highlight how your experience can meet the criteria being asked for.

LIFE AFTER ACADEMIA: ALTERNATIVE CAREER PATHS FOR PERIODICAL SCHOLARS

2024 Research Society for Victorian Periodicals Conference, “Place in the Victorian Press”

FREELANCING CAREERS

Marie Léger-St-Jean

Freelancer

Biographical Statement: Marie Léger-St-Jean is an independent scholar based in the Netherlands best known for her online bibliography [Price One Penny: A Database of Cheap Literature, 1837–1860](#). She is returning to freelancing, which she did for 10 years followed by a 2-year hiatus. She is styling herself as a “dissertation doula”, copyediting and formatting dissertations more specifically for non-native speakers of English.

1. Please tell us about your current job and the professional journey to that position, including any relevant education (i.e. graduate education or certificates), professional or volunteer experience.

I am returning to freelance copyediting after a 2.5-year hiatus. I attempted two PhDs, both of which failed (Cambridge 2009-2014; Radboud 2022-2023). However, between the two I developed a career as a freelance translator and copyeditor alongside independent scholarship as a hobby because I love conferencing so much. For 10 years, I built a mixed client-base of small businesses, non-profits, and individuals seeking mostly translations. Most important in getting my foot in the door have been the relationships I built doing student and party politics in French-speaking Montréal. I was known to be good in English because I was studying English literature and was born in the United States (but to French-speaking parents).

I did not have any training in either translation or copyediting/proofreading. I had always been good at spotting mistakes in French-language texts. A French teacher in high school even asked me to take the last stab at a collection of short stories. Throughout my ‘political career’, I would produce and go over texts, also laying out a print newsletter. I don’t recall having ever translated before being asked to do so professionally by friends who had started a think tank. I was thus translating socio-economic blog posts from French to English, painstakingly researching the terminology (and sometimes catching my friends using improper terminology). I also got my start translating in the wrong direction: normally you translate *into* your first language, which in my case is French. All this to say that none of my education brought me to my freelancing skills, and thankfully I nonetheless had the self-confidence to use them professionally.

Since artificial intelligence has made translation much less lucrative, I am now focusing on helping PhD students finish their dissertations through copyediting and formatting. I had started offering these services towards the end of my first 10 years as a freelancer. I am styling myself as a ‘dissertation doula’ to highlight the emotional labour that I perform and that the artificial intelligence cannot provide.

2. Did you consider alternate careers during your education?

Entering my first PhD, I wanted for research to be my job, which meant that I needed to work in academia. I then became convinced there were no more academic jobs, so once I stopped having fun doing the PhD, I

LIFE AFTER ACADEMIA: ALTERNATIVE CAREER PATHS FOR PERIODICAL SCHOLARS

2024 Research Society for Victorian Periodicals Conference, “Place in the Victorian Press”

quit. My classmates had designed my plan B for me by constantly repeating: ‘Well you can always translate and program!’ I found programming for clients to be incredibly stressful since I’m not that skilled a programmer, but I did find working on other people’s texts stimulating and my clients’ gratitude rewarding.

I had kept on doing research as a hobby and attempted to make it my job by starting a PhD in the Netherlands (where it’s an actual job, with pay and a work visa), but two burnouts in two consecutive years confirmed that academia is not the place for me.

I have at times envied my British classmates at Cambridge who went into the civil service after their English PhDs because I think my networking skills would be useful in a diplomatic career. However, the governments of neither Québec nor Canada value higher education for its own sake, so I could never be a civil servant without having a diploma in a relevant field. I therefore couldn’t qualify for the tests to be a librarian or a translator for the government.

3. What advice would you give to periodicals/nineteenth-century scholars who might want to pursue your career path?

If you want to become a freelancer, you need to gain confidence that your time is worth other people’s money. Volunteering runs counter to that idea and should only be done as part of research as a hobby or to gain confidence offering a new service. Nonetheless, be careful: if the people for whom you’re volunteering are potential future clients, you might find it hard to eventually start asking them for money.

Once you have the confidence to start charging, you need to set your rates. The US-based [Editorial Freelancers Association \(EFA\)](#) provides a very complete table that can give you a sense of the going rates for anything from doing website layout as a graphic designer to transcribing audio. To adjust your rates to your local market, search for ‘rate chart’ or ‘price list’, your geographical area, and the service(s) you’re wishing to offer. This market research will also give you a sense of who your competitors are, how they’re marketing themselves, what you can emulate, and what makes you distinctive.

I learned to run a business by doing it, but you can find a lot of help for free online, either through professional organizations or chambers of commerce. I was never a dues-paying member: I found support in Facebook groups. Depending on the group, you could ask grammatical questions, seek business advice, or find contracts through colleagues subcontracting their work when they were overloaded. As for marketing, I have a large enough network that, once people knew I was a translator and a copyeditor, word-of-mouth was sufficient.

If you would like to discuss any aspect of copyediting, freelancing, translation, or independent scholarship, please contact me at marie.leger.st.jean@gmail.com.