

CASE STUDY

PROFESSOR THOMAS DISCUSSES DISCOVERY, RESEARCH, AND TEACHING WITH WILEY DIGITAL ARCHIVES

Nicola Thomas, Professor of Historical and Cultural Geography

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THE CRAFT OF GEOGRAPHY

Professor Nicola Thomas, an eminent geographer and professor at the University of Exeter, studies time and place, identity and cultural politics seen through a geographical lens. “I am interested in the past-present nexus, and how we work with legacies. I have focused on the legacies of colonial encounter, and on creativity and the way in which creative practice helps inform our relationship to place,” she explains.

Alongside her research on postcolonial historical geographies, Professor Thomas has studied the practice of craft, design, and rural craft ecologies. She has written extensively and participated in documentaries about craft and worked on digital tools to support makers’ communities.

A recent honorary secretary of the Research and Higher Education Division of the **Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)**, and a trustee and member of council at the Society, she’s been a member of the UK organizing committee for the International Conference of Historical Geographers, and is Editor in Chief of the *Journal of Historical Geography*.

Image from the Royal Geographical Society archive



ARCHIVAL JOURNEYS



It's been a rich and satisfying experience for our students. The university invested in Wiley Digital Archives because we recognized it would provide students with access to resources which would enrich their research.

Primary sources are key to Professor Thomas' work. She has for instance researched the history of (William Joseph) **Harding King**, an explorer who travelled extensively in the Libyan desert in the 1920s, at the **Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)** headquarters in London.

"I travelled regularly to the RGS-IBG archive in London to study Harding King's maps, photographs and correspondence. When in an archive, you either do the work there and then, or photograph as many documents as possible. Taking photographs can be unsatisfying – you spend additional time later checking them, assessing their quality and legibility, and weighing up their value to your specific research project."

"The big shift with digital platforms like Wiley Digital Archives is that someone has taken a beautiful copy of each document. **You can zoom in, view and read every small detail.** All this can be done without visiting the archive in person, which can be time-consuming and expensive. **Having access to Wiley Digital Archives reduces our travel costs.**"

Access to digital archives can also help researchers use their time more efficiently in advance of a physical visit. This enables **focus on insightful rather than time-consuming work.**

"Seeing physical archives, touching documents and having a connection with them is really special, but the RGS-IBG digital archive gives you huge flexibility in how you can navigate and plan what's important to view. You can be extremely specific about the documents you draw up and ask to see, which means that your time is beautifully efficient."

Image from the Royal Geographical Society archive



CURIOSITY- LED DISCOVERY

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The Wiley Digital Archives platform allows more curiosity-led discovery. Whereas in a physical archive you might search for items and subjects that were more obvious, now you can search on a wide range of subjects – just in case you discover something. That can lead to surprises and reveal documents which you didn't know existed.

“The physical RGS-IBG archive is so large it can sometimes be difficult to pinpoint what you need, whereas in a digital archive attention is placed on the findability of documents,” says Professor Thomas.

“The Wiley Digital Archives platform allows more **curiosity-led discovery** within the archives. Whereas in a physical archive you might search for items and subjects that were more obvious, now you can search on a wide range of subjects – just in case you discover something. That can lead to surprises and reveal documents which you didn't know existed in the collections,” says Professor Thomas.

“Zain, a student of mine, started researching his undergraduate dissertation around the time we gained access to Wiley Digital Archives. He originally chose colonialism in Kenya as his very broad subject. While searching the digital archive, he found **an incredible photographic album from an explorer called Hannah L. Lees, chronicling her reflections of Kenya** through her camera. His interest in this album led him to change the focus of his dissertation from a broad assessment of colonialism in Kenya to the visual representation of colonial encounter in those photographs.”

“Interestingly, when Zain questioned RGS staff, they didn't have much additional information about Hannah L. Lees. The digitization process will start to fill out the history of the RGS. As we find these little pockets of archives, some of which have been forgotten, they will start to reveal the diverse histories of the Society.”

Image from the Royal Geographical Society archive



SUPPORT TEACHING, FOSTER LEARNING



It's fantastic to be able to bring the primary source material into class via Wiley Digital Archives. In time we will start to see the archives included into our teaching programs even more significantly.

"Through my role at the Royal Geographical Society I have noticed that students from the London universities can easily access the physical archives. I have never been able to take my Exeter students to London for a two-hour session, but now I can, via these digital archives," says Professor Thomas.

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During the COVID pandemic, the university could not allow students to conduct face-to-face interviews or focus groups for their dissertations. "Students could only do desk-based research, so access to digital archives has allowed undergraduates like Zain to carry on their planned research.

"It's been a rich and satisfying experience for our students. The university invested in Wiley Digital Archives because we recognized it would provide students with access to resources which would enrich their research.

"Wiley has created this beautiful resource, which has more potential than I am currently aware of," says Professor Thomas. "I have become hugely reliant on digital archives during the pandemic, and I'm keen to learn more about how we can use the digital archives and their metadata in even more significant ways."

Image from the Royal Geographical Society archive



WILEY DIGITAL ARCHIVES

Wiley Digital Archives is the only archival program dedicated to the History of Science and its connections to society and culture. We restore, digitize and catalog millions of rare, primary source materials from some of the world's most influential scientific societies and universities. Our platform is purposely designed to power research, support teaching, and foster learning.

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