

The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe, 1769-1794

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Simon Burrows proclaims the database that he and a team of researchers from the University of Leeds published last June as ‘a wonder to behold’, and indeed it is wonderful. Entitled [*The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe, 1769–1794. Mapping the Trade of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel* \[2\]](#), it draws on account books of the *Société typographique de Neuchâtel (STN)* to show where and when books were sold across the entire European continent.

By clicking through drop-down menus, the user can trace the dissemination of individual works and compare the relative importance of genres and authors. Graphs show variations in sales over time, and maps illustrate patterns of geographical diffusion. A beautifully designed network of links makes it possible to check the identity of the books themselves, often including their place and date of publication. Statistical tables provide information about best-sellers on many levels – throughout Europe, in particular countries, and town-by-town. A user can click happily through all this material, following leads and developing hypotheses to be tested by further research. *The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe (FBTEE)* represents four years of intense team work. It is a prodigious accomplishment and a joy to use.

The pleasure is compounded by admiration for the rigor of the work and for its potential relevance to some important historical questions. Do you want to calculate the impact of Voltaire and Rousseau? To measure the diffusion of works about the American Revolution? To analyze the literary diet of readers in Sweden, Italy, Russia or France on the eve of 1789? Click around in the *FBTEE*. Its authors do not interpret their findings for you. (They plan to do so in follow-up studies.) They simply make them available – in rich profusion, online, and free of charge.

The *FBTEE*'s finest feature is its maps. Color-coded and carefully demarcated according to different boundaries, they make it possible to enjoy a broad overview of trade patterns and to zoom in to individual

sites, where one can assess the relative importance of factors such as trade routes, political barriers, and cultural institutions. The design and engineering, done by Vincent Hiribarren, builds on a tradition that goes back many years to the ‘laboratoire cartographique’ of the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, but it belongs to the current flourishing of the digital humanities – that is, the study of cultural data that can be aggregated on a large scale, broken down into pertinent units, recombined to bring out hidden relations, and expressed visually, thanks to the latest advances in information technology.

The *FBTEE* also involved a vast amount of artisanal labor in the archives. Burrows’s main collaborator, Mark Curran, spent many months transcribing titles from the STN’s account books and identifying them. His work constitutes an important contribution to bibliography, both by connecting manuscript references to actual publications (a daunting task) and by making well-informed inferences about particular editions. To combine traditional research of this kind with sophisticated computational analysis is an impressive achievement – all the more so considering the scale of the study: 413,000 sales of 4,000 different editions of books to 2,895 clients scattered across Europe. The computers generated enough data points to fill the map of Europe with black dots. Can we therefore enjoy an unobstructed view of the French book trade in Enlightenment Europe?

Burrows and his collaborators clearly think so, although they refrain from attaching general arguments to their statistics. Their web site generously makes their research available to others while they prepare to incorporate it in further works of their own. Having studied the STN’s accounts myself, I can confirm that the Burrows team made excellent use of them. The richest account books, called *brouillards*, *journaux*, and *mains courantes*, cover the period from 1769 to 1787. They have gaps, but inventory records, known as *rencontres*, can be used to plug many of the holes. Further data can be derived from the *livres de commissions*, wonderful ledgers that record orders and shipments on facing pages, although they do not have information about all of the activity that Burrows and his collaborators call ‘events’ – e.g. the acquisition of works by the STN.[\(1\)](#)

Unfortunately, the documentation thins after 1787. Despite the existence of one *journal*, which includes entries from 1790 to 1797, there is not enough information to construct a significant pattern of trade from the outbreak of the Revolution until December 31, 1794, the terminal point of the *FBTEE* study. The statistics from the 1780s also pose problems, because the STN’s business was vulnerable to political and economic factors. Strong measures taken by the French government virtually closed the French market to Swiss publishers in June 1783. The STN then fell back on its non-French trade, but for a variety of reasons it suffered a partial bankruptcy (suspension of payments) in 1784. After reorganizing and refinancing its business, it cut back severely on production and concentrated on selling off the enormous backlog of its inventory. It commissioned a sales agent named Durand to travel through Italy and central Europe in 1787–8, flogging its wares at greatly reduced prices. The record of his transactions provides some indication of books that reached distant markets, but many of those books were known in the trade as ‘drogues’ or ‘gardes-magasin’ – that is, works that had piled up and remained unsold for many years in the warehouse. Moreover, the *FBTEE* team identified only a minority of the books that Durand sold – 40 per cent of the sales he arranged during his tour of Austro-Hungarian territory. By 1789 the STN had ceased printing books, and its business amounted to little more than an effort to run down its inventory. Burrows and his collaborators found no sales for 1789 and only a trickle for the next five years; so they did not come up with enough data to measure the book trade all the way to 1795. Even at its height in the 1770s, the STN cannot be considered the ‘Amazon’ of the 18th century, as Burrows claims. But it seems churlish to object to inadequacies in data accumulated with so much care and effort. Even if one limits the *FBTEE* statistics to the period that runs from June 1769 to June 1783, when they are most revealing, they offer a wonderfully rich vein of information about the book trade.

What to make of them? Judging from videos and some preliminary articles linked to the web site, Burrows and his collaborators worried about one principal problem, the representativeness of the STN’s business, and they concluded that it could indeed be taken as representative of the book trade in general ... to a certain extent. Unfortunately, that extent cannot be determined, because no comparable archives exist. The *FBTEE* team had to limit themselves to one source, the account books of the STN. But they combed through it so

thoroughly and subjected their methods to so much self-criticism that their findings command respect. They took my own work as a starting point and subjected it, too, to some healthy criticism. In the interest of promoting a dialogue, I would like to discuss some key issues where our arguments run parallel and diverge.

In *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*, I argued that the STN's function as a wholesaler in addition to that of a publisher meant that it disposed of a 'floating stock' available to all of its allies among the publishing houses that surrounded France in a fertile crescent that extended from Amsterdam and Brussels through the Rhineland and Switzerland into Avignon, which was then papal territory. Those publishers furnished France and all of Europe with cheap, pirated editions of books published in France and with books that could not pass the French censorship. Although they competed, they often cooperated. The STN made formal alliances with the Société typographique de Lausanne and the Société typographique de Berne to produce joint pirated editions, and it developed confidential relations with many other publishers. When it printed a book, it often traded a large proportion of the edition for a choice of works available from the stock of friendly fellow publishers. It also worked out deals to tap their stock when one of its clients ordered a book that it did not keep in its warehouse. As a result, it could sell a great many of the works in current circulation, and its sales pattern suggested trends in the book trade as a whole. The *FBTEE* group accepted this argument, but they asserted that it applies only to Swiss houses, since publishers in the Low Countries and the Rhineland could have developed a very different floating stock among themselves. I agree, and I should not have implied that the STN's network of alliances extended far beyond Swiss territory, although it traded intensely with publishers and wholesalers like Pierre Gosse Junior of The Hague, Clément Plomteux of Liège, and J.-L. Boubers of Brussels.

My own attempt to wrestle with the problem of representativeness actually took a different direction. Although the STN occasionally sold books to individuals, those sales were so scattered and exceptional that one cannot trace consumption beyond the level of booksellers. In rare cases, notably the marketing of the *Encyclopédie*, there is enough information to sketch a sociology of readers.⁽²⁾ But the STN marketed nearly all of its large and varied stock to other booksellers, both wholesalers and retailers. Unfortunately, many of its clients ordered only a few books and then ceased to trade with the STN, because they found the transport costs too heavy, the service too slow, and the price too high, or because they could get more favorable terms from other suppliers, who operated from a closer location on the shipping routes. As a consequence, the STN's account books are full of transactions from dealers who placed only one or two orders – often 'pour essai', as they put it in their letters – and then stopped. Many customers ordered only one book, such as the *Encyclopédie*, a best-seller that the STN published as a partner in an international consortium, and never ordered another. Other customers drew most of their stock from other suppliers, and turned to the STN only when it offered some unusual 'nouveau' (a trade term that meant a new publication, often of an exceptional kind, such as a pamphlet about current events). Sales of such small quantities to such occasional customers cannot furnish a statistical profile of their trade, and they cannot be aggregated to form an accurate picture of the book trade in general. Unlike the *FBTEE* team, I decided that I could produce representative statistics only from booksellers who placed a large number of orders over a considerable stretch of time. Therefore, I restricted my study to steady customers of the STN, whose businesses could also be assessed qualitatively by reading their correspondence.

I also limited my statistical sampling to France and to the illegal trade within the French market. Those limitations are, I agree, unfortunate. After a great deal of work in documents outside as well as inside the STN archives, I was able to distinguish which books were treated as unambiguously illegal by the French authorities; but I could not measure their importance in relation to the book trade as a whole. The STN dealt so heavily in illegal works that its relations with its principal clients in France can serve as an index to France's illegal book trade. But it did not stock and could not procure all the books in existence in the market for French literature from 1769 to 1789. Much as I wanted to argue for the representativeness of its archives, I concluded that the papers of one publisher could not be taken as a measure of publishing in general. I claimed only to provide a reliable analysis of a particular sector of the trade, but by doing so I was able to draw on other sources – police raids on book stores, confiscations in the Paris customs, and references in specialized catalogues of forbidden books – in order to assess the STN's business against other

indicators of the diffusion of forbidden books. By trimming my research strategy in this fashion, I believe I came up with valid, if limited, results.

That strategy, however, looked inadequate to the *FBTEE* group for another reason: I measured the demand for books as indicated by orders from booksellers rather than their supply as demonstrated by records of sales in the STN's accounts. To be sure, a sales transaction has a satisfyingly definitive character: money, if only in the form of a promissory note or a bill of exchange due to expire in 12 or 18 months, is exchanged for a commodity. One can treat a sale as an indication that a physical book reached a particular place at a certain time. True, the STN's customers often shipped back books that they did not want – not because 'returns' were permitted in the 18th-century trade, as Burrows and his collaborators claim, but because the copies were so defective that the STN's customers refused to accept them, or because, as often happened, the STN slipped into its shipments 'nouveau-tés' that had not been ordered in the hope that its clients would buy them. The only case I have found when the STN permitted a bookseller to return unsold copies concerned Johann Conrad Deinet of Frankfurt. After tortuous negotiations related to his practice of ordering too many books and paying for too few of them, the STN permitted him to sell its works 'en commission' – that is, to pay for those he sold and to return the rest.⁽³⁾ Such arrangements were extremely rare. Nothing like the modern practice of returns existed in the French book trade – or, I believe, in the early modern book trade anywhere.

Aside from the question of returns, the principal difficulty in assessing sales has to do with customers who did not represent a stopping point in the diffusion process but relayed books to other locations that cannot be determined. A large proportion of the STN's clients were fellow wholesalers whose distribution systems were as great or greater than its own. Its most important client in the Low Countries, Pierre Gosse Junior of The Hague, sold most of his books in France and England, yet his sales appear on the *FBTEE* map at the location of The Hague. The key client of the STN in German-speaking Switzerland was the Société typographique de Berne, which disposed of the books it received from the STN primarily at the Frankfurt and Leipzig book fairs, where they were loaded on barges and wagons for distribution throughout central and northern Europe. The dissemination of those books cannot be mapped from the STN's account, and this problem is especially important in the case of publisher-wholesalers with whom the STN dealt by means of swapping sheets.

The exchange trade was so important for the Neuchâtelois that they isolated it under a special rubric in their account books – *comptes de changes* as opposed to *comptes d'argent*. They exchanged books heavily with dealers in Avignon, a great center of pirate publishing, and Lyons as well as Geneva and Lausanne, the main sites of their exchange trade. In tracing sales, Burrows and his collaborators came up with valuable information: 39 per cent of the STN's business went to Switzerland, as opposed to 37 per cent in France and 24 per cent in the rest of Europe. But those figures do not prove that the STN's commerce was primarily a Swiss affair. They indicate, on the contrary, that the STN's books circulated widely to destinations that cannot be known, because they passed through intermediaries who sold them to other dealers who cannot be identified. Despite their look of *pointilliste* precision, therefore, the maps in the data base provide only a very approximate picture of the dissemination of literature.

Could not the same objection be directed against an argument based on demand rather than supply? Yes, if the demand were measured according to orders placed by large wholesalers like Heubach in Lausanne, Gabriel Grasset in Geneva, and Jean-Jacques Flick in Basel. But I restricted my statistical analysis to French dealers who supplied local and regional customers and whose business can be assessed qualitatively by the letters they wrote and the letters that were written about them, both by local informers and by sales reps (*commis voyageurs*) of the STN. If the dealers placed only one or two orders with the STN, I excluded them from my statistical samples, because one cannot see a general pattern by connecting the dots formed by a small number of data points.

True, the STN often failed to fill the orders that it received. The *livres de commission* reveal that supply did not always match demand, although the two coincided quite well on the whole. Therefore statistics based on orders (expressed both in the booksellers' letters and in the *livres de commission*) do not give a precise

picture of diffusion. They express demand. But literary demand is a significant measure of taste and interest. The STN's sales were restricted to books it had in stock or could procure from other publishers. The orders from its customers included whatever they wanted. Admittedly, many booksellers limited their orders to titles they found in the STN's catalogues and prospectuses. But many more included references to works that had come to their attention from their commercial correspondence, 'annonces' in periodicals, and rumors passed through the professional grapevine.

Information was a crucial element in the book trade, but booksellers often got it wrong. In reading their orders, one has to allow for very approximate spelling – e.g. the innocent-sounding *Portraits des Chartreux* ordered by Veuve Baritel of Lyons, who actually wanted the pornographic *Histoire de dom B....., portier des Chartreux*. In very rare cases they may have heard about works that were rumored to be in the pipeline but were never published – for example, *Les moines après les chiens*, a supposed sequel to *Le chien après les moines* (Amsterdam, 1784) which I have not been able to locate. Such aberrations notwithstanding, I believe that my statistics represent the demand in France for forbidden books in general, despite some of the bias inherent in the trade of the STN.

I fear that statistics based on sales are not equally representative. Aside from the problem of aberrations concerning dealers who bought too few books for their purchases to be taken as a profile of their trade, there is a further difficulty, which concerns the STN's ability to supply its customers. Like other publisher-wholesalers, it distinguished two kinds of books in its stock: *livres de fonds* (its own editions and a few works that it acquired in large quantity from allied houses) and *livres d'assortiment* (small numbers of works, usually acquired by exchanges). The latter often gave out. As complaints from customers testify, the STN might sell a half dozen copies of a work in its *assortiment* stock and then be unable to satisfy the demand for dozens more. Just as the STN sold books that dealers had not ordered, it failed to sell books that they did order. Better, I believe, to study demand, as limited to steady customers of the STN, rather than supply, as scattered among all the clients who appeared, however fleetingly, in the STN's record of its sales.

The attraction of the statistics produced by the *FBTEE* group is not so much that they concern sales as that they cover such a vast territory. To be sure, other historians have mined the STN archives for information about the diffusion of French literature outside France. Germany has been studied by Jeffrey Freedman, Italy by Renato Pasta and Anne Machet, Poland by Marie Béguin-Knoepfler, the Austrian Netherlands by Jeroom Vercruysse, Russia by Eric Berthoud, and the Iberian peninsula by François Lopez. The role of the STN in Switzerland itself can be appreciated from the work of Charly Guyot, Jacques Rychner, Michel Schlup, Silvio Corsini, Georges Andrey, Eddy Bauer, Olivier Burri, Clorinda Donato, and Jean-Daniel Candaux. What Burrows and his collaborators have added to this literature is statistics aggregated in such a way as to map the diffusion of everything the STN sold.

To illustrate the diffusion of a single work, the web site presents a map showing the sales of S. A. A. D. Tissot's *Onanisme*, a treatise on the supposedly dangerous effects of masturbation, which fascinated and horrified many readers in the 18th century. Spain and Portugal are represented by six copies sold in Lisbon, Poland by seven sold in Warsaw, and the Netherlands by six sold in Amsterdam. Can such small numbers represent the diffusion of a popular book throughout an entire country? Did readers in Stockholm (28 copies sold) have more interest in sexual practices than those in Copenhagen (two sales)? And was there no interest at all in great cities that bought no copies from the STN: London, Rome, Leipzig, Frankfurt, Madrid, Vienna, and Prague? To measure the diffusion of this book, one would have to dispose of larger statistics based on the sales of other publishers and wholesalers, but unfortunately they do not exist.

The search for more significant statistics can take the user to the website's list of the ten best-selling books, which aggregates figures from all of Europe for the entire period 1769–94:

Planta gagnant sa vie en honnête homme: 16,787 copies

Tableau de Paris: 14,076 copies

Destruction de la Ligue: 10,188 copies

Mémoire apologétique des Genevois: 8,428 copies

Abrégé de l'histoire sainte et du catéchisme: 6,815 copies

Géographie par Ostervald: 6,397 copies

Bible: 5,323 copies

Contrat conjugal: 4,164 copies

Mon bonnet de nuit: 4,043 copies

Collection complète des œuvres de Madame Riccoboni: 3,843 copies

The work that stands out at the top of the list is a 72-page pamphlet that the STN printed for Théodore Rilliet de Saussure, who was involved in a scandalous court case in Geneva. It can be considered a 'vanity' edition (apparently the STN also produced a second edition that was shipped to Rilliet's family and eventually destroyed), and it seems unlikely that readers outside of Switzerland ever heard of it. The next two books were by Louis Sébastien Mercier, who was indeed a popular author, but his works occupied a disproportionately important place in the STN's stock, because it printed and reprinted them many times. The *FBTEE* team could not identify the fourth most important best-seller, but the account books show that it was actually a pamphlet entitled *Pièces importantes à la dernière révolution de Genève*, which the STN printed for some Genevan radicals during the mini-revolution in Geneva of 1782. The fifth book was an STN edition of an apologetic Protestant work by Jean-Frédéric Ostervald, an ancestor of the STN's director, Frédéric-Samuel Ostervald. Jean-Frédéric also produced an important, annotated edition of the Bible, which the STN reprinted and sold widely to Protestants. This 'Bible d'Ostervald' probably accounted for most of the sales lumped together as 'Bible' in the seventh place of the list. The work in the sixth place was probably an STN edition of the schoolbook that Frédéric-Samuel Ostervald published in 1757 under the title *Cours élémentaire de géographie ancienne et moderne et de sphère*. Best-seller number eight was a rather obscure but interesting legal treatise on the annulment of marriages by Jacques Le Scène-Desmaisons. It was also an STN edition, as were the last two works, one by Mercier and the other by the popular author of sentimental novels, Marie-Jeanne Laboras de Mézières known as Mme Riccoboni. Considering the preponderance of STN editions and the parochially Swiss subjects of many of the books, the best-seller list does not serve very well to identify the tastes for all French books everywhere in Europe. It does not contain any works by well-known *philosophes*, a strange result for research intended to reveal cultural patterns in 'Enlightenment Europe'.

The list of best-sellers for Paris, the capital of the Enlightenment, looks equally odd:

Contrat conjugal: 4,141 copies

Tableau de la monarchie française: 2,000 copies

Description des arts et métiers: 1,616 copies

Testament politique de l'Angleterre: 1,558 copies

Vérité (de la): 1,544 copies

Philosophe du Port-au-Bled: 1,276 copies

Observations sur la littérature en France: 1,255 copies

Mémoire apologétique des Genevois: 1,200 copies

Théorie des lois criminelles: 1,062 copies

Inceste avoué à un mari: 1,050 copies

This list contains many of the same titles as those on the best-seller list for all of Europe. *Planta gagnant sa vie en honnête homme* is absent, but it is replaced by *Inceste avoué à un mari*, a similar work on the Genevan court case that the STN also produced for Rilliet de Saussure. All of the books on the list were printed by the STN, and several can be considered ‘vanity’ editions. Four of them – *Testament politique de l’Angleterre*, *De la Vérité*, *Observations sur la littérature en France*, and *Théorie des lois criminelles* – were commissioned by Jacques-Pierre Brissot, who had great trouble disposing of them and paid only a fraction of his printing bill. The second book on the list, *Tableau de la monarchie française*, was printed by the STN for Louis Valentin de Goesman, an adventurer best known for his polemics with Beaumarchais. It was the first volume of a multi-volume defense of Bourbon absolutism, which Goesman never completed. Whether he sold any copies of that volume seems doubtful. He planned to incorporate it in other multi-volume works that he attempted unsuccessfully to sell to other publishers under four different titles. His correspondence with the STN, which merits a study in itself, provides a wonderful case of literary skulduggery, but the sales attributed to him in the account books cannot be taken as evidence about the diffusion of political works. The third work on the best-seller list was the STN’s most important enterprise, a 19-volume reprint of the *Description des arts et métiers* published for the French Académie des sciences by Moutard, a powerful Parisian bookseller. Although the STN augmented its edition with new material compiled by Ostervald’s son-in-law Jean-Elie Bertrand, Moutard managed to get it banned from France as a pirated work. After long negotiations, the STN reached a settlement with him, and therefore most of its edition was eventually shipped to Paris. The remaining two works on the list, Le Scène Desmaison’s *Contrat conjugal* and Mercier’s *Philosophe du Port-au-Bled* may have sold fairly widely in Paris, but it seems odd that the Parisian best-sellers did not include any works by popular authors such as Raynal and Linguet, not to mention Voltaire and Rousseau.

Despite many attempts to establish relations with relatively marginal Parisian booksellers such as Pyre, Cugnet, Monory, Costard, and Saillant, the STN was never able to sell many of its books in Paris. The Parisians generally refused to do business with a publisher whom they viewed as a pirate, and the powerful dealers who dominated the Parisian guild mobilized the police to defend their market from intruders. In fact, the one bookseller who handled a fairly large number of STN books, Pierre Desauges, a marginal retailer located near the Palais de Justice, probably operated as a spy for the police and helped engineer confiscations of its shipments. The STN retailed some of its books directly through its own agents, notably Quandet de Lachenal, but it never cracked the Parisian market, and its uneven sales cannot be taken as typical of diffusion in Europe’s most important city.

Data drawn from its trade in other cities are more revealing, particularly in cases where dealers placed large and regular orders. Charles Guillaume Muller of Saint Petersburg, J. J. Weitbrecht of Saint Petersburg, and Christian Rüdiger of Moscow bought hundreds of books, usually once a year to replenish their stock before the Baltic froze. Statistics of their purchases suggest the character of the French literature that reached Russia, occasionally even by wagon over frozen roads. It seems to have been largely pedagogical. Of the ten works bought most often by the dealers in St. Petersburg, three were school books and four could not be identified. Of the top ten in shipments to Moscow, eight were schoolbooks or books for children – valuable information but disappointing for anyone interested in the diffusion of the Enlightenment. At the other

extreme of the map, the ten works bought most often by booksellers in Lisbon were mainly medical. They included three treatises by Tissot, along with two Latin texts and two plays but no works that can be associated with the Enlightenment.

The user interested in the Enlightenment can consult the list of authors whose works sold best throughout Europe. There at last one comes upon Voltaire. He occupies third place among the top ten, just behind Rilliet de Saussure and just above Brissot and Ostervald. Rousseau does not make it onto the list, nor do Montesquieu, Diderot, Raynal, Mably, Condillac, or any other famous *philosophes*, including non-French authors such as Adam Smith, Hume, Beccaria, Lessing, and Kant. It would be misleading, however, to conclude that they did not reach readers, because the list favors authors of books published by the STN. As in all the other ranking lists, it contains built-in distortions, which result from a decision to aggregate all sales together and to treat them in the same manner – that is, to lump STN editions and ‘vanity’ editions published by the STN with books that the STN acquired in smaller numbers from other publishers. *Livres de fonds* should not be given the same statistical weight as *livres d’assortiment*.

When faced with the counter-intuitive results of their research, the *FBTEE* team made diligent efforts to correct them; and to their credit, they built a corrective mechanism into the structure of the web site. Therefore, if you want to identify the top ten best-sellers in all of Europe without including works produced by the STN, you can select ‘option’ on the toolbar; click ‘edition type’ on the drop-down menu; deselect ‘STN editions’, ‘STN commissioned editions,’ and ‘STN editions published in cooperation with others;’ click ‘update preferences;’ and go back to ‘rank’ on the toolbar. You can then study a best-seller list purged of the bias caused by STN editions. It looks much less erratic:

Mémoire apologétique des Genevois: 8,428 copies

Psaumes: 2,888 copies

Collection complète des œuvres de M. Dorat: 2,201 copies

L’An deux mille quatre cent quarante: 2,006 copies

[Unidentified Durand tour works]: 1,905 copies

Le Nouveau Testament: 1,631 copies

Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse du Barry: 1,489 copies

Magasin des enfans: 1,381 copies

Lectures pour les enfans: 1,378 copies

Œuvres de Rousseau: 1,312 copies

Of these, two must be eliminated – the top best-seller, because it was actually *Pièces importantes à la dernière révolution de Genève*, an STN edition, and the works in fifth place, which cannot be identified. The Psalter and the New Testament were editions intended for Protestants, and they suggest the importance of the Huguenot network for the STN, although they cannot be taken as evidence for the diffusion of French books in general. It is interesting to find two children’s books, *Magasin des enfans* and *Lectures pour les enfans*, on the best-seller list, although they, too, represent a niche rather than the general market. The remaining five works probably corresponded pretty well to the taste for French literature throughout Europe – and, I would add, to demand as well as to supply. Claude-Joseph Dorat, an enemy of the *philosophes*, was

known for his frothy poems and plays, all of them forgotten today. His popular novel, *Les Malheurs de l'inconstance*, is a good example of the light literature that sold well at the end of the Ancien Régime. Mercier's utopian novel, *L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante* and Pidansat de Mairobert's scandalous biography of Mme du Barry, *Anecdotes secrètes sur Mme la comtesse du Barry* certainly were best-sellers. So were Rousseau's works, which the STN sold in editions that varied from only a few volumes to a 31-volume set. One *philosophe* therefore made it to the best-seller list, although the list itself contains too many peculiarities to be representative of the literary diet that was actually consumed by readers.

In short, 'Enlightenment Europe' as seen by the statistics of the *FBTEE* is a Europe without much Enlightenment. Perhaps that view is valid. Most literary history is written from the perspective of a corpus of classics that are taken to be typical of their time, and the history of books provides a way to correct the anachronism built into that approach. It may be, therefore, that the works of Dorat, Mercier, and Pidansat de Mairobert had more readers than those of Voltaire, but it is impossible to know by consulting the *FBTEE*. Its statistics fail to resolve the difficulties in studying the diffusion of literature, but they are full of fascinating information, especially for researchers who want to explore niches, such as the market for Protestant works and children's books. The *FBTEE* team waded through a vast collection of difficult documents. They emerged in the end with some results that challenge standard views of literary history, and they are to be congratulated for making their findings available free of charge on a beautifully designed web site for anyone to consult in order to agree, disagree, and carry the inquiry further.

Notes

1. See John Jeanprêtre, 'Histoire de la Société typographique de Neuchâtel, 1769–1798', *Musée neuchâtelois* (1949), 70–9, 115–20, and 148–53 and Jacques Rychner, 'Les Archives de la Société typographique de Neuchâtel', *Musée neuchâtelois* (1963), 1–24. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See my *The Business of Enlightenment. A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie 1775-1800* (Cambridge, MA, 1979), chapter six. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See the excellent study, based in large part on the STN archives, by Jeffrey Freedman, *Books Without Borders in Enlightenment Europe. French Cosmopolitanism and German Literary Markets* (Philadelphia, PA, 2012), pp. 92–113. [Back to \(3\)](#)

Other reviews:

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