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Eighteenth Century Collections Online (A Thomson Gale Digital Archive)

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[Eighteenth Century Collections Online](#) [2] (ECCO) is an immensely ambitious undertaking: over 150,000 texts in an online searchable database. Reviewing ECCO tests any reviewer's knowledge to the limit, and a serious review should consist of reasonably lengthy and thoughtful contributions from a wide variety of scholars. My original intention was to make use of ECCO for a while, and then publish an account based on first-hand experience. However, events have moved forward and, for reasons that will be made clear later, it has become necessary to publish this review more precipitately.

The aim of ECCO is avowedly to digitise every significant monograph published between 1701 and 1800 in the English language, and also every significant monograph in any language printed in the British Empire during this period. Purists will no doubt find grounds for argument - what, for instance, is the meaning of 'significant'? But such arguments are for perfectionists. ECCO's 33 million pages are seriously impressive. The publishers have reasonable criteria: ECCO will include all first editions published between 1701 and 1800, and all variant editions published in the same period. To be included, a variant edition must contain substantial alterations from a prior edition: these may be prefaces, additional chapters, or indexes; a straight reissue with a new title page or dedication is not considered a substantial alteration. However, the publishers are also including all printings (i.e. both variant and non-variant editions) of Addison, Bentham, Bishop Berkeley, Boswell, Burke, Burns, Congreve, Defoe, Jonathan Edwards, Fielding, Franklin, Garrick, Gibbon, Goldsmith, Hume, Johnson, Paine, Pope, Reynolds, Richardson, Bolingbroke, Sheridan, Adam Smith, Smollett, Steele, Sterne, Swift and Wesley. This is good enough for most scholars: the line has to be drawn somewhere between *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and James Anderson's *A practical treatise on draining bogs and swampy ground*.

ECCO's material is divided sections: History and Geography, Social Science and Fine Arts, Medicine, Science and Technology, Literature and Language, Religion and Philosophy, Law and General Reference

('ephemeral material on life in the eighteenth century': this module includes dictionaries, encyclopaedias, lexicons, catalogues of private libraries, sale catalogues and many more interesting items), and these can be searched separately, should one wish to do so. The appeal is set sufficiently widely to include any scholar of any discipline who is serious about accessing eighteenth-century texts. There can be no doubt of the importance of ECCO. It has the capacity to transform many levels of research, particularly at Master's level and beyond.

Chronologically, ECCO is the successor to Early English Books Online (EEBO), which will be familiar to many scholars. Historians will know of the importance - not to say sheer convenience - of EEBO. EEBO is, unfortunately, only partially searchable. The current TCP project aims to render searchable 20 per cent of the 125,000-title database. ECCO contains over 150,000 titles, all fully searchable. In addition, Thomson Gale would argue that the facilities of ECCO are considerably better - their publicity stresses the search facility, and with good reason - with the ability to search and to browse by author, title and keyword, as well as to search by illustration, an e-table of contents, a flexible fuzzy search facility (vital for coping with the variations of eighteenth-century spelling, and characters such as the double long ss, which can be confused with ff) and good and convenient linkages when the appropriate book is accessed. I have found it very straightforward to use, with the caveat that inexperienced users browsing for the numbers of citations, as opposed to specific authors or specific works, might be well advised to use the (very straightforward) advanced search facility. There are other facilities of which the publishers are proud: texts and pages can be bookmarked with *InfoMarks*, *Mark List* adds items to reading lists, *Reading View* offers a more comfortable positioning of the view for reading page by page and the *e-Table of Contents* enables an easier navigation through the book - as near as currently practical to doing so with a physical volume. *Full Citation* is the English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC) record with the list of holding libraries of each text. ESTC data will be updated approximately annually.

It is impossible to be sure how many books were published in eighteenth-century Britain. This is the breakdown from ECCO:

Numbers

1700-09

8906

1710-19

12053

1720-29

10084

1730-39

10645

1740-49

11486

1750-59

13299
 1760-69
 16375
 1770-79
 18066
 1780-89
 20429
 1790-99
 29412
 1800
 3624
Total
154379

The spine of ECCO is the English Short Title Catalogue. As for coverage, I have conducted what might be called an indicative survey, which would be interesting to pursue further. As one might expect, works with a national coverage do well; those with local coverage do less well. The following table shows the number of references in some well-regarded studies and the percentage of these references that can be found in ECCO. Time constraints prevent the net being cast wider. The works taken are:

- P. Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People* (Oxford, 1989), ch. 3.
- L. Colley, *Britons. Forging the Nation* (London, 1994), section ?
- L. Colley, *In defiance of oligarchy : the Tory Party 1714-60* (Cambridge, 1982).
- K. Wilson, *Sense of the People* (Cambridge, 1995). From this I have sampled two chapters: ch. 1, which deals with localities and uses local sources and ch. 2, which deals with national issues. Brean S. Hammond, *Professional Imaginative Writing in England, 1670-1740* (Oxford, 1997), bibliography, A-G.

refs
ECCO
%

Polite and commercial people, ch. 3
 33
 25
 76

Colley, Britons
 33
 26
 79

Colley, *Tory Party*[\(1\)](#)

73

Wilson, *Sense of the people*, ch. 1

16

3

19

Wilson, *Sense of the people*, ch. 2

21

20

95

Hammond, *Writing in England*, A-G

69

60

87

The score for Hammond is deceptively low as most of the nine missing sources appear in other formats, for instance in the complete works of the author, maybe published a little later.

In other words, currently a hit rate over 70 per cent for material of national coverage. The publishers are still filming eighteenth-century books, and expect to be able to offer an additional 15,000 titles at some point in the future.

ECCO can be searched by keyword, or a combination of keywords, as well as by author or title. The keyword search is effective and the temptation to play bibliometric games is hard to resist: there are 620 works containing references to "Britons" in the 1710s, 2622 in the 1780s and 4531 in the 1790s. References to "free people" are to be found in 390, 948 and 1755 works respectively. 'Clean' is even less prominent than 'comfort', and both fail to advance much, while 'dirt' hardly makes an appearance; 'sacred' is rather insignificant and 'profane' even less so. 'Infinity', however, does rather well.

Total publications

infinity

Tory

"free people"

Britons

Infancy

1710-19

12053

455

2071

390

620

2075

1780-89

20429

1344

3942

948

2622

5643

1790-99

29412

2116

6042

1755

4531

9079

Percentages of all works published in decade with this citation:

infinity

Tory

"free people"

Britons

Infancy

1710-19

3.8

17.2

3.2

5.1

17.2

1780-89

6.6

19.3

4.6

12.8

27.6

1790-99

7.2

20.5

6.0

15.4

30.9

Total Publications

[clean\(2\)](#)

comfort

dirt

sensibility

sacred

profane

1710-19

12053

71
143
4
0
184
16
1780-89
20429
170
252
14
115
353
37
1790-99
29412
287
380
18
140
468
51

Percentages of all works published in decade with this citation:

clean

comfort

dirt

sensibility

sacred

profane

1710-19

0.6

1.2

0.0

0.0

1.5

0.1

1780-89

0.8

1.2

0.1

0.6

1.7

0.2

1790-99

1.0

1.3

0.1

0.5

1.6

0.2

We can doubtless look forward to similar exercises of equal crudeness in the future. The sorcerer's apprentice will be unavoidable.

The reason for the urgency of this review is because of the price. This is a large effort by Thomson Gale, and the price is correspondingly high, at around 315,000 pounds sterling per institution for the content alone; in

addition there is an annual access fee. Very few institutions in the UK are able to afford that. JISC are therefore considering purchasing ECCO on behalf of all UK universities, with an annual access fee of between 2,000 and 3,500 pounds per annum depending on the size of institution. However, JISC need to have sufficient declarations of interest before making the necessary investment; these are required by 22 October (via the feedback form at <http://www.galeuk.com/jiscconsult> [3]). Librarians should be contacted as a matter of urgency, but feedback is required from both librarians and academics, and the form allows for this. Without JISC support, very few libraries in the UK will be able to afford ECCO and, without ECCO, many areas of research into the eighteenth century are in danger of being seriously disadvantaged.

September 2004

Notes

1. Colley's *Tory Party* was based on the entire bibliography; numbers unfortunately mislaid.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. The search was for 'clean*' and 'comfort*', to cast the net wider.[Back to \(2\)](#)

Other reviews:

[4]

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Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2056>

[2] <http://gale.cengage.co.uk/product-highlights/history/eighteenth-century-collections-online.aspx>

[3] <http://www.galeuk.com/jiscconsult>

[4] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>