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Mark Curran, *The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe I: Selling Enlightenment*. London: Bloomsbury, 2018. 231 pp. Illustrations, maps, charts. £110.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN: 9781441178909; Simon Burrows, *The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe II: Enlightenment Bestsellers*. London: Bloomsbury, 2018. xvi + 254 pp. Illustrations, maps, charts. £110.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN: 9781441126016.

Review by Geoffrey Turnosvky, University of Washington.

When the June 1784 “Acte de Cautionnement” put a plan in motion for dissolving the Société typographique de Neuchâtel, the end of a tumultuous and unsuccessful fifteen-year run in the book trade was in sight, though it would take another ten years to fully dismantle the enterprise. The print shop/wholesaler was founded in 1769 by its three directors, Jean-Elie Bertrand, Frédéric-Samuel Ostervald, and Samuel Fauche, who gave the operation the lofty and fashionable name of *société* (though they were its only members) and who ambitiously reached out to bookdealers across Europe in search of clients. But the STN was never able to establish the stability it sought. Its outreach was mostly rebuffed, and it lurched from one business model to the next based on the vagaries of the market, on shifting politics, and on the particularities of its geographic situation. It built up an enormous stock, though this spoke to its struggles to sell its wares more than to its success. An inventory from June 1786 recorded 1,805,427 unwanted sheets needing to be liquidated (the printed *feuille* was the basic unit by which a book’s price was determined). In the course of its short existence, the STN bought, distributed, and sold 3,987 editions in 70,584 transactions, amounting to a total of 445,496 copies (v. 1, p. 7). Heady numbers. But over 19 years, until 1788 after which the STN did almost no business, this comes to about 10.2 transactions a day involving 64 copies.

It would have been hard, contemplating the STN’s failure in 1784 or 1786, to imagine the outsized impact that this soon-forgotten print shop would have on the historiography of the French Enlightenment. It is important to recall, of course, that this impact owes nothing to any actual role that the STN played, as purveyors of Enlightenment texts, but entirely to the fortuitous circumstances that led to the preservation of its records. The upshot is a remarkable archive of documents, which the director of the Bibliothèque publique et municipale de Neuchâtel acquired in the 1930s (v. 1, p. 33), comprising 24,000 letters from customers and clients—booksellers, authors, printers, typefounders, bankers, papermakers, etc.—15,000 copies of letters sent, and a set of account books with extensive, if not entirely complete, records on orders, fulfillments, sales, prices, shipping, purchases, supplies, and current stock.

Documenting, in addition to those almost 4,000 titles and 450,000 copies, nearly 800 clients in over 200 cities and towns across Europe with whom the STN did—or more frequently, failed to do—business, this trove of materials has seemed to offer tantalizing glimpses into the flow of books in the 1770s and 80s; and as such, these documents have been extensively studied for insight into late eighteenth-century reading habits. Thanks especially to the work of Robert Darnton, these materials have played a particularly prominent role in debates about how Enlightenment ideas spread before 1789 and how people in France were prepared, by their reading, for the Revolution. Darnton’s deeply influential analyses of the “literary underground” and the circulation of prohibited books saturating late eighteenth-century France in hostile, irreverent writing, sapping the belief of a population in the sacrality of its monarch and its social order, was inspired by decades of research in the STN archives.[1]

Darnton’s arguments always rested on two approaches to these records. First, among the materials available, he focused on the letters from clients, specifically on a sample from “steady customers,” and on the proposals and orders for books these letters conveyed.[2] Darnton presumed that books ordered equaled books sold (and distributed, not to mention read!); and from these orders, he developed bestseller lists based on how many copies of works this small but regular subset of customers requested. Dominated by clandestine works that could not be printed in France, these lists, Darnton conjectured, should give us an accurate, quantified measure of what French people were really reading in the decades before the Revolution. Of course, that would, in turn, hinge on the representativeness of the STN’s order lists. Would a list of the most frequent requests from the most regular customers look the same at this one Swiss print shop as similar lists appear at other extraterritorial printer-wholesalers supplying French readers with the titles they sought? Darnton believed the answer was yes. The orders were coming from a broad range of locations (his sample included booksellers “scattered across the kingdom”[3]). And above all, Darnton argued that wholesaling dealers like the STN all dealt in more or less the same “floating stock” of works that were in so much demand in France in the second half of the eighteenth century.[4] This was because publishers swapped stock amongst themselves as part of an “exchange system,” in order to reduce risk and maintain a diversified inventory.[5] In this way, all extraterritorial Francophone book wholesalers and publishers drew from the same wide pool of underground titles, from London to Amsterdam to Cologne to Neuchâtel: “There is no book of any importance that appears in France that we are not capable of supplying,” wrote Ostervald in an April 1773 letter that Darnton cites as illustrative of the effectiveness of this system.[6]

Mark Curran and Simon Burrows, with their two volumes and, above all, with their remarkable database, *The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe* (FBTEE), which the volumes explain and draw from, set out to shift our perspectives on the STN and to rethink the conclusions we had long drawn from their archives about what French people read and how the Enlightenment spread. First and foremost, rather than focusing on the correspondence with clients, Curran and Burrows call our attention to the numerous account books that the STN kept. There is a good reason these books have not garnered the attention they deserve relative to the letters, as Curran notes at the end of chapter one: they are very hard to read. They are also incomplete; yet the magic of the double-entry bookkeeping techniques the firm used means that, if one understands the method—and Curran demonstrates his impressive command of these early modern accounting techniques—items can be cross-referenced between the different types of books. Gaps in one type of book, say, in the first-entry day-books into which daily purchases and sales were entered, can be filled with information from, for instance, a stock book, which recorded the STN’s

inventory at regular intervals. This is painstaking and complex work, which extends not just to decoding the complicated accounting system but also to deciphering the abbreviated short-hand titles the books used and to identifying the editions referenced and retrieving their full bibliographic profiles through exhaustive searches in library catalogues. In addition, names of authors had to be tracked down since—and this not an uninteresting side-glimpse into the mindset of the book trade as late as the 1780s—other than for a handful of celebrity figures, authors' names are hardly mentioned in the STN's books or correspondence (v. 1, p. 46). Years of such meticulous collecting, verification, and cleaning of data have led to an extraordinarily complete picture of the STN's business spanning over two decades: those 70,000 transactions involving 445,000 copies of books.

Online since 2012, the FBTEE database now offers a “bibliometric” approach to studying the STN archives, which gives users the possibility of far more complete empirical querying of the records, allowing for more complex forms of statistical analysis (v. 2, p. 1). The data can be sorted for all kinds of factors that are exceedingly difficult, if not to say impossible to parse in the letters. They can, for instance, be sorted for specific editions or for commissioned works (indeed, commissions were a huge part of the STN's trade, accounting for almost 25% of all copies sold during the STN's existence; for six of its top 15 bestselling titles; and for its overall top seller, a bizarre pamphlet by a Neuchâtelois notable accusing his wife of incest. The vast majority of the 16,787 copies printed by the STN were acquired and destroyed by the author's family after he had drowned in Lake Neuchâtel!

The most significant shift in perspective is what the FBTEE data reflect. Drawn from the account books, the numbers now point to actual copies sold and shipped (and potentially read, though not always, as in the case of the above-cited bestseller), rather than to orders placed. Burrows and Curran argue forcefully that the differences are extremely significant. There are, in reality, sharp disconnects between what was requested in letters and what was sent out. A 1775 order from Charles Fontaine in Mannheim asked for 8 works. The order book shows that only 4 of these requests were fulfilled, while the STN interpreted liberally Fontaine's final invitation to “add 1 ex of everything you have that's new,” throwing in an additional 23 titles to the shipment (v. 1, p. 43-44). The package of 52 copies of 27 distinct works sent in fulfillment of the order barely resembled the list originally requested. And while orders came in from all over Europe, supply was an entirely different story. As it turns out, Ostervald's 1773 pitch that the STN was “capable” of supplying any book that appeared in France was pure sales hype.[7] When actual books, rather than titles ordered, are counted, the reality is that the overwhelming majority of items the STN supplied to its customers came either from the STN's own presses or from the presses of a small network of Swiss printers with which the STN regularly exchanged stock. The “single most surprising discovery of the FBTEE project,” Curran notes (v. 1, p. 51), is how local the business was: two-thirds of the 445,000 books that the STN handled came from their own presses; two-thirds of the remaining copies were from other Neuchâtel printers (Fauche had his own side business) or from Lausanne, Geneva and Bern. He observes that “[i]n total, well over 90% of the STN's stocks were obtained from French-speaking Switzerland” (v. 1, p. 51). In fact, this downplays how Swiss the STN's product was, since much of the STN's trade in non-Swiss books came in the period of decline in the 1780s, when the entire Swiss Francophone trade was in crisis (v. 1, p. 51).

This discovery explodes the idea of that there was floating stock of titles common to all Francophone booksellers from London to Switzerland. Curran's volume in particular emphasizes

the opposite: there was instead great geographic variation in the book trade, especially between a Swiss zone and a northern Dutch/English zone, as a function of variable political and cultural contexts and of the difficulties of transporting books across Europe. “If an ordinary eighteenth-century Frenchman, then, perhaps working his way around the Grand Tour, walked into a bookshop in London, and then later in Amsterdam, then Paris, and then Geneva, he would have found dramatically different books stocking the shelves,” Curran concludes, in a formulation he’ll return to several times (v. 1, p. 96). And, in turn, this conclusion explodes the possibility that the records of the STN could be broadly representative of French and Francophone European reading habits. Here is the great conundrum lying at the heart of the project. For if the books the STN supplied to booksellers and readers in France and Europe were not directly representative of the global circulation of Francophone books in the late eighteenth-century, what can we learn from this archive? What kinds of general conclusions should we draw from the study of a single database that, Curran and Burrows insist, was defined by its Swiss-ness and by the idiosyncrasies of a short-lived and troubled commercial trajectory?

This is the gist of the two volumes, which are premised on a broad critique of Darnton’s floating stock thesis and his argument for the representativeness of the STN and which then, in turn, grapple with the prospect of an alternative framework for establishing the broader significance of a database that Curran and Burrows so painstakingly established. It is a fascinating endeavor, not least because one senses that the two authors are not always on the same page. One might reasonably wonder why two volumes are necessary as a companion and introduction to the online database. The truth is that the volumes are quite distinct in both tone and substance.

Curran’s *Selling Enlightenment* focuses on the nature of the STN’s business itself and is less optimistic that broad conclusions about the spread of Enlightenment can be ascertained from their records. Here the bibliometric approach stands, above all, as a corrective to overly generalizing arguments about the presence and influence of clandestine books in France, based on a small fraction of the correspondence of one short-lived Swiss business. It shows the deep regional fragmentation of the book trade, as well as the effectiveness of French measures to control the circulation of illegal books from abroad. It has become a commonplace that French censorship was ineffective by the late eighteenth century and that the France was therefore awash in unauthorized books. But the STN’s accounts show, on the contrary, how deeply their commerce was affected by the State’s efforts to control the trade. The reforms of August 1777, which sought to revitalize the French provincial book trade by loosening the monopoly hold of the powerful Parisian Guild, also, as Burrows notes, placed a centrally-appointed inspector in every *Chambre syndicale* in France (v. 2, p. 134). And more existentially, the laws of June 1783, which required all book shipments into France to pass through inspection in Paris, effectively ended the extraterritorial trade, according to Curran. Far from being ineffective, these measures led to generalized crisis in the Swiss print trade and rang the death knell of the STN, which began to wind down its business the following year.

Bibliometrics also lead Curran to important new insights into the rhythms and temporality of the book trade, undetected in earlier studies. The STN’s approach to the book trade was far from static, but constantly shifted—from ambitious start-up to a focus in the late 1770s on grand productions (like the *Encyclopédie* and the *Description des arts et métiers*) to commissions in the early 1780s—in response to evolving conditions. As he notes, “[t]here were many STNs, none of which ever quite cracked the art of selling Enlightenment” (v. 1, p. 113). Moreover, it confronted a market ruthlessly thirsting for the new and indifferent to the old. Books that did not sell within

a year or two would rot on the shelves for decades (constituting the lion's share of those almost two million unsellable sheets in 1786). This is a new take on the absence of the classic *philosophes* of the so-called High Enlightenment from the 1740s-70s in the bestseller lists of the 1780s. And if any quality in Curran's analysis generally defines an Enlightenment corpus, it is this breathless temporality rather than a specific type of content: "It is notable, indeed, that the only works that the STN sold which enjoyed some commercial resistance to the ravages of time--school books, religious texts and so forth--were precisely those that made little or no attempt to engage with the Enlightenment zeitgeist" (v.1, p. 140).

In the face of Curran's skepticism, Burrow's volume, *Enlightenment Bestsellers*, seeks to salvage from the STN records something of a clearer picture of what types of works might have shaped the perspectives of late eighteenth-century readers. He argues that a careful manipulation of the data, which the FBTEE interface enables, can help correct for the singularities of the archive and reconnect its sales record with larger cultural patterns. Much of the volume, especially in its early chapters, explores the different functionalities of the website and investigates how they can be adjusted to query for different snapshots of the literary market. Overall, Burrows argues that the market offered up more anodyne fare than what Darnton (or, in another perspective, Jonathan Israel) proposed. In a series of later chapters, Burrows filters the data to hone in on the diffusion of scientific, religious, political, and illegal titles, and he discovers a trade dominated neither by scandal and pornography nor by radical philosophy, but by more moderate and grounded fare: "STN readers were preoccupied with the everyday business of living: being born, farming, preserving food" (v. 2, p. 142) as well as with "day-to-day, bread and butter politics [rather than] abstruse political ideas" (v. 2, p. 160). Chapter nine on the "Illegal Sector" confirms earlier estimates that 50% of books circulating in France on the eve of the Revolution were technically illegal, but it shows that only a tiny fraction of these--about 5-6% of new books--were the libelous *livres philosophiques* emphasized by Darnton. Ten times as many were counterfeits of otherwise unproblematic texts (v. 2, p. 122-123).

Burrows's analysis here draws heavily on records from the stamping and legalization of counterfeit books following the 1777 decrees, which required French provincial booksellers to declare their pirated editions in exchange for amnesty. In fact, many of the more compelling and clearest arguments in the volume draw not from the STN data but from other sources. The story of the Charmet brothers in Besançon in chapter ten is a case in point. Charles-Antoine Charmet was one of the steadiest clients of the STN between 1769 and 1789, exchanging 179 letters with the Société and receiving from the STN, according to the FBTEE, 7,064 copies of 393 titles, ranking him eleventh among all clients with whom the STN did business.[8] One might imagine that he was a significant purveyor in a mid-sized parliamentary town and that his orders, including those that were fulfilled, would be an excellent gauge of what the people of Besançon were reading. But outside of the STN papers, Charmet is barely discernible in the historical record. He declared a mere 32 copies of 6 titles in the post-1777 *estampillages*, which was the least of any Besançon bookseller by a factor of 100. This figure was dwarfed by that of his brother Félix-Antoine, also a bookseller, who declared 7,150 books. In reality, Félix-Antoine appears to be the far more prominent bookseller of the two. He was printer to the archbishop of Besançon, specializing, unsurprisingly, in religious books, which left him with a much larger, yet less easily locatable inventory to declare. Burrows does masterful detective work teasing out the traces of Félix-Antoine's publications in the registers of *permissions simples* and, from these traces, extrapolating his prodigious activity: tens of thousands of copies of pious Catholic texts, like *L'Imitation de Christ*, *Journée du Chrétien* and the ubiquitous *L'Ange conducteur*, printed cheaply in

massive runs for heavy use. These books have far higher loss rates than the more modest productions of the STN (99% of which are findable in collections today). For physical reasons (due to cheap production) and as the effect of a cultural bias privileging Enlightenment *philosophie* over devotional books, they have not been preserved in modern library collections (v. 2, p. 147-154).

This bibliometric glimpse into the overwhelming presence of religious reading in late eighteenth-century Besançon is, for me, one of the most powerful and significant stories in Burrows's volume. But the STN account books, no less than the orders Darnton studied, are an obstacle to understanding it, not a solution (as Burrows acknowledges). It shows, of course, that the FBTEE needs to be used carefully, in conjunction with other archives and databases, an imperative that is entirely consistent with everything Curran and Burrows affirm about it. They certainly do not suggest that the tool is straightforward to use, or that it will provide easy and quick answers.

This does, though, raise a final thought about audience and the digital humanities. Burrows repeatedly describes the FBTEE as a "digital humanities" project. This seems a self-evident description of a "complex MySQL database comprised of almost 100 interrelated tables," as Curran writes, and of the technique of counting books at scale which the database makes possible: "scholars can expediently output more query results than they might ever hope to analyse," he continues (v. 1, p. 1). Yet it is a little jarring that the two printed volumes read as, well, printed volumes, fairly disconnected from the database to which they refer. A future iteration of this project might leverage digital publication tools to better integrate text and database.

There is also a larger issue. The two volumes and the database engage Darnton in a debate on what the STN records can tell us about reading habits in the late eighteenth century. The fact is, though, that the debate feels disjointed, insofar as each side seems to address its claims to decidedly distinct audiences. A 2015 *Journal of Modern History* article by Darnton, in which he presents his own STN-based digital platform, *A Literary Tour de France* (www.robertdarnton.org), makes this clear. Justifying his site's focus on client letters, Darnton criticizes the account-based approach of the FBTEE platform, citing the example of Voltaire's *Candide*: "The STN's accounts make it possible to plot every copy sold by the STN on a map of Europe, but the statistics are so trivial as to make the map useless," he states. The accounts, accessed via the FBTEE, show fourteen copies were sent to Russia but none to Spain, Portugal, the Low Countries, Britain and Scandinavia. "Can one conclude," he asks, "that demand for *Candide* was greater in Russia than in all those other countries and that it had ceased to exist in most of western Europe during the years 1769-1789?" [9]

Substantively, this is an absurd straw-man example; but it says something about Darnton's orientation towards publics that are less knowledgeable about the materials in question and thus prone to such a misreading. This is not necessarily a criticism. Darnton's ability, with his engrossing and accessible writing, to raise the profile of the French eighteenth-century among a broad, non-specialist audience has done a tremendous service to the field. It has also given his arguments about Enlightenment book culture, and the centrality within it of scandalous works and scurrilous hucksters, enormous currency. Note the contrast with Curran's imagined users of the FBTEE database: "specialists" who, having perused his complex and difficult volume, are now "better placed to understand the STN sales and purchase records for certain authors, books, genres or fields" and can "proceed, one hopes, without falling foul of the data's many potential pitfalls" (v. 1, p. 148).

These are two strikingly dissimilar perspectives, entailing different arguments, different forms of argumentation, and distinct and disconnected vectors of influence. One wonders what the middle-ground might be, or if one of the specificities of the STN archive is that it does not really allow for a middle-ground, where the question of what eighteenth-century French people read would be resolved.

NOTES

[1] Key articulations in this STN-based body of work include *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie, 1775-1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979); *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Prerevolutionary France* (New York: Norton, 1996); and more recently, *A Literary Tour de France: The World of Books on the Eve of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[2] Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers*, 32.

[3] Robert Darnton, "The Forbidden Bestsellers of Prerevolutionary France," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 43, 1 (Oct 1989), 27. The 1996 volume includes two maps showing the locations in France of the selected "major" and "minor" booksellers (61-62).

[4] Darnton, *The Forbidden Bestsellers*, 55.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., 56. Darnton quotes Ostervald's letter to Astori of Lugano, dated 15 April 1773.

[7] Ibid.

[8] See <http://www.robertdarnton.org/literarytour/booksellers/charmet> (accessed May 10) and <http://fbtee.uws.edu.au/stn/interface/rank.php?t=client&n=all&e=rawsales&d1=01&m1=01&y1=1769&d2=31&m2=12&y2=1794&g=everywhere&d=table> (accessed May 10).

[9] Robert Darnton, "The Demand for Literature in France, 1769-1789, and the Launching of a Digital Archive," *The Journal of Modern History* 87, 3 (Sept. 2015): 517. In footnote 12, Darnton notes that "[t]hese criticisms apply especially to Simon Burrows, e.g. *The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe, 1769-1794*."

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