

A NEW CENTURY OF PRESS FIGURES

DARIA FEDEWYTSCH-DICKSON

THE INTERPRETATION OF PRESS FIGURES has remained a matter of dispute since the topic became the subject of scholarly discussion in the late 1940s. That dispute apart, there are various aspects of press figures which are capable of certain demonstration, including their incidence. Though they were introduced in the seventeenth century and were not abandoned until well into the nineteenth, press figures are a characteristic of 'English' printing of the eighteenth century; their incidence is summarised by Gaskell thus:

Some 10 per cent of English books were figured in the 1690s, and 25 per cent from 1700 to 1720 . . . Then from 1720 until 1800, a majority — some 60 per cent — of English books were figured.¹

The acknowledged source of these percentages is Kenneth Povey's 'A Century of Press-figures' (*The Library*, 5th ser., 14(1959), 251-73). Povey's sample comprised 322 octavo volumes of more than five sheets extent drawn from the Knowsley collection at Liverpool University; excluding the seventeenth-century instances, the sample numbered 277. Povey admitted that his Knowsley sample was not 'sufficient for a regular statistical analysis', with a disproportionately small number of items from some decades; in fact for the decade 1771-1780 it contains only 2 items, neither of which is figured, so that his claim that the incidence of the 1720s was sustained for the rest of the century is not borne out by his evidence.

Since Povey's sample was unstructured it simply cannot bear the burden of the interpretation placed on it. A more structured sample, in which the decades are equally represented, is better designed to reflect changes over the century: the figures reported here derive from a study of 1000 volumes (100 per decade), of all formats, located in various Melbourne libraries.² There are limitations in this new sample: 100 may still be rather small to represent a decade, and there is the unknown effect of the nature of the collections from which the sample was drawn. Nonetheless, the results (tabulated overleaf) are certainly a more accurate indication of the incidence of press figures than were Povey's. The revised figures do bear out Povey's generalization that the use of press figures increases after 1720 and remains fairly constant for the rest of the century, but the percentages are somewhat lower than his: between 40 and 50 in each decade.

Melbourne

NOTES

1. Philip Gaskell, *A New introduction to bibliography* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), p.133.
2. Daria S. Fedewytsch, 'A Study of Compositorial Practices as a means of localizing and dating works printed in the British Isles in the Eighteenth Century' (unpublished M.A. thesis, Monash University, 1985).

INCIDENCE OF PRESS FIGURES, 1701-1800, ARRANGED BY DECADE

| POVEY | | | | |
|---------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Decade | Sample | Figured | Unfigured | Percentage |
| 1701-1710 | 58 | 19 | 39 | 33 |
| 1711-1720 | 63 | 15 | 48 | 24 |
| 1721-1730 | 43 | 27 | 16 | 63 |
| 1731-1740 | 23 | 16 | 7 | 70 |
| 1741-1750 | 21 | 15 | 6 | 71 |
| 1751-1760 | 12 | 6 | 6 | 50 |
| 1761-1770 | 26 | 14 | 12 | 54 |
| 1771-1780 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| 1781-1790 | 12 | 9 | 3 | 75 |
| 1791-1800 | 17 | 7 | 10 | 41 |
| Totals | 277 | 128 | 149 | 46 |

| FEDEWYTSCH | | | | |
|---------------|-------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Decade | Sample | Figured | Unfigured | Percentage |
| 1701-1710 | 100 | 9 | 91 | 9 |
| 1711-1720 | 100 | 20 | 80 | 20 |
| 1721-1730 | 100 | 46 | 54 | 46 |
| 1731-1740 | 100 | 41 | 59 | 41 |
| 1741-1750 | 100 | 43 | 57 | 43 |
| 1751-1760 | 100 | 39 | 61 | 39 |
| 1761-1770 | 100 | 52 | 48 | 52 |
| 1771-1780 | 100 | 40 | 60 | 40 |
| 1781-1790 | 100 | 48 | 52 | 48 |
| 1791-1800 | 100 | 41 | 59 | 41 |
| Totals | 1000 | 379 | 621 | 38 |

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