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Blue Books and the Victorian Reader

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Victorian Studies

Indiana University Press

Volume 46, Number 2, Winter 2004

pp. 308-318

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Blue Books and the Victorian Reader

Oz Frankel (bio)

Mr. Gradgrind's famous retort "Facts, Facts, Facts" at the beginning of *Hard Times* (1854) is often invoked to demonstrate the ascendancy of utilitarianism in Victorian life. What is frequently overlooked, however, is that while Charles Dickens, among others, challenged the "heartless"

Benthamite takeover with its fetish of figures and facts, many more across the Victorian political spectrum complained simply that the public was inundated with excessive factual material. Lawmakers, government officials, and reformers pointed to the unrestrained production of parliamentary papers in general, and blue books in particular. For instance, in 1865 Member of Parliament William Ewart complained on the floor of the House of Commons, "It had rained blue-books—Pelion had been piled on Ossa, and Ossa on Olympus. It had been sarcastically remarked that if you wanted to hide a question the best plan is to bury it in a blue-book" (*Hansard's* 178 [1865]: 215). A fellow lawmaker declared, "[I] object to having tons of papers, which are never opened, sent to my lodgings...[I can] not exchange them for books, for that would be selling them; [I can] not burn them, for that would be voted a nuisance" (*Hansard's* 179 [1865]: 1144).

While several blue books catered specifically to the public palate and became "bestsellers" of sorts, many enormous tomes languished in government warehouses finally to be sold as wastepaper. Their sheer size and impenetrability could perhaps signify state power, but also symbolized a loss of control, a failure of the state's digestive system. For some, government had become an incontinent printer.

This paper briefly examines the Victorian state's role as a publisher—not merely a printer—of blue books, namely reports by parliamentary committees and royal commissions. The great attention given over the last two decades to the nexus of knowledge and power frequently obscures the publishing function of the state. After all, Parliament and government were not just dispensing or deploying **[End Page 308]** ephemeral knowledge, but, in reality, they were printing, binding, and circulating documents that were often labeled books, as in "blue books," marked by their blue paper cover. Whereas in the eighteenth century culture emerged as a connecting tissue between the state and its citizens (exemplified by the notion of a distinct national literature), by the middle of the nineteenth century the state itself became a cultural force, producing and peddling official publications. At the same time, the

Victorian state's massive entrance into print culture was replete with mishaps. It exposed the state to various challenges inherent to the dynamics of print culture. Once disseminated, the state could exercise little control over the fate of its published documents.

Trade unions and other oppositional organizations, to give an example, regularly scanned blue books in search of evidence that could confirm their grievances. They then republished these plundered bits of information in their own pamphlets and broadsides, emphasizing that official investigations had produced these particular testimonies, figures, and facts. Such appropriations thus made shrewd use of the authority of the state that vouched for the veracity of its printed record. Similarly, Richard Oastler, the firebrand advocate of the Factory Movement, insisted on giving testimony to official inquiries. He relished the opportunity of quoting himself from the printed page of a blue book, since his utterances then had the weight of "facts." By producing blue books, the state also risked the critical scrutiny to which Victorian literary culture subjected other published books. Indeed, the periodical press reviewed and critiqued reports of parliamentary select committees and royal commissions of inquiry often in conjunction with other, sometimes hostile, factual reports as well as pieces of literature.

The initial expansion in official print output occurred during the French Wars at the turn of the nineteenth century. It was the printer of the House of Commons, Luke Hansard, who first gave parliamentary documents the appearance of a serial publishing project. He inaugurated the use of side annotations, selected uniform titles, prepared indices, and employed an opulent style marked by large fonts and airy pages. Beforehand, official printers had not been allowed to deviate from the form or even the size of the...

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