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HOUSE OF COMMONS PARLIAMENTARY PAPERS



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Philippa Levine, Professor; Mary Helen Thompson
Centennial Professorship in the Humanities; Co-Director
British Studies Program, The University of Texas at Austin.

HOUSE OF COMMONS PARLIAMENTARY PAPERS (HCPP) FROM PROQUEST INCLUDES THE COMPLETE FILE OF PARLIAMENTARY PAPERS, ALSO KNOWN AS SESSIONAL PAPERS OR BLUE BOOKS, DATING FROM 1715 THROUGH TO TODAY.

An essential resource for students and researchers in British history, *HCPP* contains over 11 million pages of original documentation and 247,000 papers on topics of interest to departments as varied as Engineering, Politics and Social Policy.

At the University of Texas at Austin this resource is vital to the work of the history department, which has always had an influential presence in the field of British History.

Professor Philippa Levine joined the department in 2010 after teaching in the U.S., U.K. and Australia. Her own research interests include British Empire; intersections of race and gender; and science, medicine and society. Her courses include, *The World of Victorians* and *Introduction to Historical Inquiry*. As well as history undergraduates many students in her classes are from other disciplines, particularly English and Political Science.

'Whenever I'm teaching British History, I'll be using House of Commons Parliamentary Papers in my classes,' says Philippa. 'When I arrived at the department I immediately requested that we have access to this resource, it's just so comprehensive.' In particular Philippa highlights the importance of shorter documents to engage students with the period they are studying. 'Shorter documents allow students to get a real feel for the language, concerns and ideas of the period. I always use primary sources where possible. We're guiding the students

towards a well-developed critical acumen, and for that primary resources are so much better than a textbook. Undergraduates need to know what the world looked like for Edwardians and Victorians. And at postgraduate level, primary resources are what it's all about.'

Primary texts are used every week in the reading lists given out to students and they are encouraged to search for references for use in extended papers. The range of topics addressed by the British Government means that the resource rarely fails to yield something of interest on diverse topics including labour conditions, the rights of women, and industrial and economic history.

Philippa Levine also points out that many libraries in the U.S. don't carry the Blue Books, and that previously this kind of documentation has been approached on a topic by topic basis. *The House of Commons Parliamentary Papers* allows for cross-topic searching and research, legislation is a complex process and *HCPP* shows how issues were explored and legislation was formed.

'The fact that students can get it at all times of day makes them more likely to look at it,' she says, on the importance of providing students with comprehensive digital databases they can access from anywhere, 'you need to beam it into their bedrooms.'

House of Commons Parliamentary Papers includes a huge range of globally relevant content with extensive reporting on foreign affairs, including detailed trade statistics, correspondence relating to international events, and reports from British diplomats abroad on matters of interest in their location. Writers and thinkers who provided evidence, contributions and memoranda to these papers include, Matthew Arnold, John Stuart Mill, Michael Faraday, Charles Babbage, Edwin Chadwick, Marconi, Keynes and Beveridge. And the evidence gathered by numerous Committees and Royal Commissions influenced social and political philosophies as disparate as those of Marx, Dickens and Disraeli.

'The wonderful thing about House of Commons Parliamentary Papers is, it doesn't matter what your topic is, if you're working in British History, you are going to find something. It literally doesn't matter whether you're working on art, foreign policy or sewers. Anything you can think of you're going to find materials if you search correctly.'

And that's the beauty of a collection like this, having it all so easily available.'

At University of Austin the resource serves a double purpose as it is used to teach postgraduates how to search. 'It's a very good way of teaching postgraduates in particular how to search. It seems to me it has a double pedagogic purpose. One is the documents themselves, and what you can mine from them. Then there's teaching students how to search, that's a really key thing particularly if they're going to write a PhD. There's huge value in having these catalogued and presented through an authoritative comprehensive source, rather than through open web searching. On the open web, you're more likely not to find anything of interest.'

The only problem with searching *HCPP* is that you always get more than you bargained for!

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