

FINDING EDINBURGH'S PASTS: INTRODUCING THE *OEC BIBLIOGRAPHY OF EDINBURGH HISTORY*

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This article introduces the new *OEC Bibliography of Edinburgh History* and offers some reflections on trends I have identified in the process of compilation. Commissioned by the Old Edinburgh Club in late 2017, the Bibliography offers a focal point for those interested in Edinburgh's history. The rationale was relatively straightforward: to establish a bibliography of materials written about Edinburgh, bringing together articles, books, chapters in edited collections, and doctoral theses. It allows users to find material quickly without having to trawl through multiple databases, and it is hoped that this is reasonably comprehensive to 2017 inclusive; further updates will follow with more recent material as well as other publications which come to light. The Club has already indicated a willingness to undertake this process, so that the Bibliography remains a point of departure for anyone starting research into the city's past.

Introducing the Bibliography

Links and instructions on how to access the *OEC Bibliography of Edinburgh* are online at www.zotero.org/oec_bibliography. The resource is hosted on Zotero, an established free-to-use bibliographic management tool, of which the main screen is shown in Figure 1. On the left hand, you can filter quickly by type or category; in the top right a text search function is provided; the main window shows the titles and authors. When an item is selected, bibliographic data are displayed on the right-hand pane. Whilst some will wish simply to find references from the Bibliography, Zotero offers

considerable additional functionality for arranging, displaying and citing material.

The richness of local history is such that publishing occurs on many levels, including major academic projects, scholarly works, and more informal publications. I rejected a hierarchical view and have deliberately included material that might be of interest to OEC members on a very flexible basis. When in doubt, material was listed. This means there is a considerable volume of work which is self-published included in the database.¹ There are 23 books, for example, recorded as 'Private press for the author', as well as many modest publications by various institutions such as churches or community groups. Traditional hierarchical approaches to scholarship might well exclude such material. However, not only is such an approach elitist, but clearly this material contributes to our understanding of the city's past and is inherently useful to researchers. No inference about quality should be drawn from either inclusion or exclusion. It is for an individual member to determine the suitability and usefulness of any historical work for their purposes. It would be beyond the scope of this exercise to ascertain the precise geographical scope of the subject matter of each item, but impressionistically, it seems that the further out from the Old Town and New Towns one goes, the more likely it is that this kind of material is found.

At the other end of the spectrum sit costly academic works. Journal articles can be prohibitively expensive for those without institutional access to subscription databases. The original plan had been to include this material only at a later stage. However, open access rules, whilst not unproblematic, are making more material available to the public. With a citation, it is

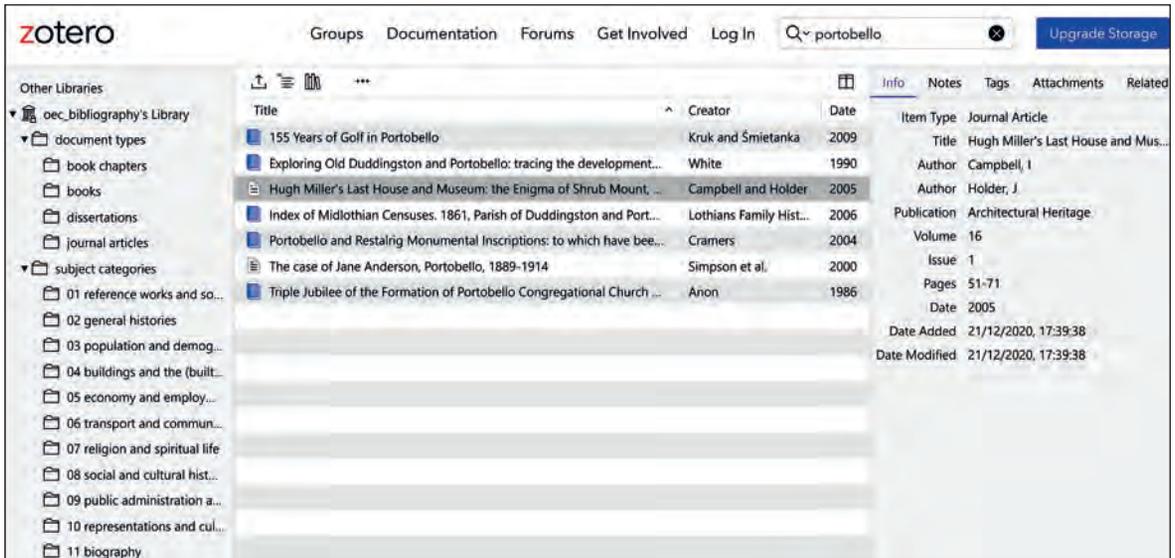


Fig. 1. The OEC Bibliography in Zotero. Screenshot of a search on 'portobello' [detail]

possible to find articles using search engines, often posted by authors to university repositories. Digital resources are increasingly available to National Library of Scotland (NLS) readers remotely. At time of writing, this includes 'EUP journals online' so that several major journals can now be accessed from home.² Individual academics may well have copies they can share, and very few would be unwilling to furnish serious scholars with copies of material they otherwise are unable to access. Members located in Edinburgh have the advantage of the NLS to assist them; most local libraries will offer a subsidised inter-library loan service. In the same line, most doctoral theses are available as PDF downloads from or via the British Library's EThOS website.³ With all this in mind, there is no good case for not including all this material, even if some historical societies might have previously been dubious about the value of including resources which can be so expensive to access.

Citations have been gleaned and compiled from library catalogues and bibliographical databases as well as a handful of specialist print bibliographies.⁴ Using a mixture of manual searches, queries for material in free-text – that is searching for 'Edinburgh' – and controlled-language searches on everything formally assigned to headings such as 'Edinburgh – History' and 'Edinburgh, Scotland' brought together as many references as possible. Erroneous inclusions were removed, as

well as duplicates identified, and records assessed individually for completeness. In most cases their contents were verified and gaps such as publisher data were completed and standardised.

Each item was assigned a category as best fitted its principal focus. In determining the number and wording of the headings, I consulted a handful of relevant scholarly bibliographies. I was mindful that excessively complex categories are not necessarily useful for smaller datasets, and with a target of 750 entries, agreed on eleven categories. For comparison, the *Urban History* bibliography on which I previously worked has ten.⁵ The number used by other relevant examples ranges between 10 and 28.⁶ The first version of the Old Edinburgh Club dataset has 2117 entries, and this will hopefully grow considerably with subsequent updates and expansions.

Edinburgh's past is of increasing interest to judge by the number of entries. In the database: some 385 records relate to 1960 or earlier. The majority, however, are relatively recent scholarship. In Figure 2 below, the chronological spread of publication is shown, with the number of entries per decade, showing growing interest over time. To facilitate comparison with a wider picture, figures of the number of records in the Royal Historical Society's *Bibliography of British and Irish History* are presented as a point of contrast, indexed so direct comparison can be made with the OEC Bibliography. It is clear that whilst the

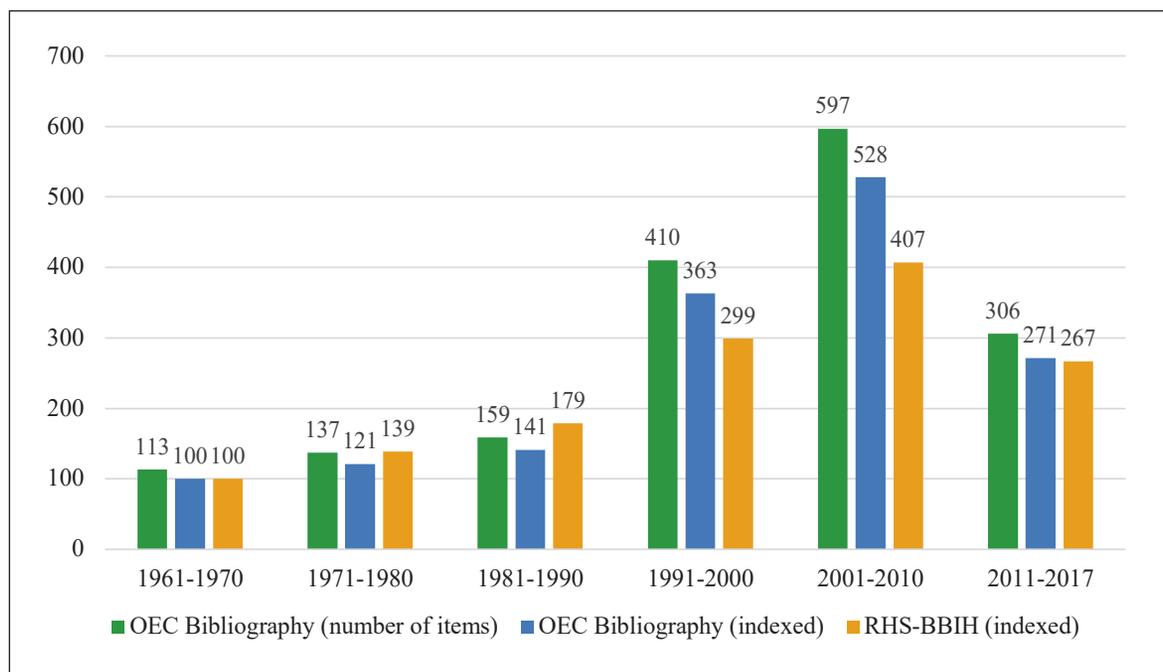


Fig. 2. Chronological distribution of entries on the OEC Bibliography compared with the *Bibliography of British and Irish History*. Note: the indexed figures are based on the number for 1961–70 = 100. *Bibliography of British and Irish History* accessed 20 October 2020

number of history publications is increasing generally, it is increasing at an even higher rate for Edinburgh.

The present Bibliography is not the finished product. Firstly, it is impossible that over 2000 records are entirely accurate. Secondly, no bibliography can ever be comprehensive, and this release only includes material published not later than 2017. Thirdly, it might be expanded in scope to encompass materials such as film sources, town plans, maps, or oral histories. Fourthly, the needs of users may require adjustments in functionality. The data are held in a spreadsheet which can be uploaded to a different platform in the future. After its placement on Zotero, around a dozen enthusiastic OEC members tested and experimented with the database and gave helpful feedback. Information about how to help with this is found on the Bibliography's Zotero page.

Edinburghs in print

The great revealing moment in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) is when that singular teacher leads her students to the Old Town, which is almost entirely unvisited by her charges:

They approached the Old Town which none of the girls had seen before, because none of their parents was so historically minded as to be moved to conduct their young in the reeking network of slums which the Old Town constituted in those years.⁷

Brodie's adoration of the Old Town signals to readers that she is not just a historian but one of a deeply Romantic sensibility; it also presents her as an object of humour, but points us to a serious consideration. In 2010 Morris argued that the history of twentieth-century Edinburgh was limited to specific themes of which the strongest was 'certain aspects of the built environment, notably architecture', often at the cost of the study of industry, and with such images occluding the extent to which industry and manufacturing employed more than professional services.⁸ Firstly, the city's fabric has fascinated in an almost fetishised way. In the Bibliography, 19 per cent of entries relate principally to the physical fabric. Contributors to the *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club* have focused even more strongly on this, particularly historically: 37 per cent of Original Series articles and 30 per cent of the New Series are assigned to the 'Buildings and the (built) environment' category. The proportion seems high when calculated thus. The Old Town

Category	All entries						BOEC only		
	All (n)	All (%)	Articles (%)	Books (%)	Chaptrs (%)	Dissertations (%)	Old Series (%)	New Series (%)	Both Series (%)
Reference works and source materials	141	7	8	8	2	0	14	4	11
General histories	104	5	3	9	2	0	9	5	8
Population and demographics	50	2	1	3	2	7	0	1	1
Buildings and the (built) environment	394	19	23	13	17	20	37	30	34
Economy and employment	133	6	8	4	6	7	11	6	9
Transport and communications	117	6	6	2	10	7	3	3	3
Religion and spiritual life	248	12	8	17	12	10	4	5	4
Social and cultural histories	361	17	17	17	22	10	8	7	8
Public administration and politics	237	11	11	9	13	19	9	11	10
Representations and culture	149	7	6	7	6	15	2	13	5
Biography	181	9	8	11	8	5	3	14	7
<i>Number of items</i>	2117		943	724	286	164	235	116	351

Table 1. Subject categories in the OEC Bibliography

appeals romantically as a city of monarchs, of books, of lawyers, of criminals; the widowed capital once was much more. Those of a less romantic disposition have focused on the New Town where classical architecture is the apogee of taste, and a whirlwind of Georgian polite sociability is set amidst geometric town planning. The religious communities of the city account for another 12 per cent of the entries, and this might be folded in under the built environment as so many of these are histories of churches and their communities.

Secondly, historians have focused on doctors, nurses, and surgeons: their training, their practice, and their professional identities. A text search of article, book, chapter, and dissertation titles yields 77 items containing 'medic'. Even with an old university and an important medical school, the numerical extent of this is striking. These professions had implications

for the public health response in the city, which Miss Brodie still found reeking. Lawyers are the other major professional grouping associated with the city. A text search for 'law', 'legal', or 'advocate' yields 40 items. It is tempting to suggest the disparity between the two reflects the relative ease of attracting funding for the medical humanities.

Specific constituencies have made different contributions. That made by contributors to the *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club* over the last century or so can be seen in Table 1, in the right hand columns considering the categorisation of entries for articles in the *BOEC*. This can be summarised as a focus on the built environment, economic history, and a tradition of publishing transcribed primary sources leading to more entries categorised as 'Reference works and source materials'. Contributors have published less on religious and on social and cultural history.

Doctoral dissertations have focused quite heavily on 'Population and demographics' – accounting for 7 per cent, but only 2 per cent overall of entries; likewise 19 per cent are concerned with 'Public administration and politics', but only 11 per cent of publications overall are. 'Transport and the economy' seem to have received relatively little attention. Despite the apparent statistical basis for these findings, this is not the most robust process: items might have been ascribed several categories, but such an approach can become unfocused, as there is arguably a political and economic aspect to all things.

Both looking at some elementary statistics and impressionistically, it is clear that a historical 'imaginary' exists of Edinburgh. This collection of images and ideas about the city's past has led to rich and numerous explorations of the built fabric. The dominance of this imaginary has left other topics relatively neglected. For example, there are only six hits for 'gender' and seven for 'sex' occurring in

publication titles. Population and demography have received relatively little attention. The economic life of the city, particularly industry, has been neglected – these statistics support Morris's argument about the dominance of built fabric in the city's historiography.⁹

The Bibliography was conceived as a point of departure for those starting to seek answers, but there is no reason why it cannot be used to identify questions. As it grows and develops, it is hoped that it will serve as a valuable resource for those researching Edinburgh's pasts for many years to come. The historiographical discussion above about what has and has not received attention is simply descriptive. However, with Edinburgh's history receiving so much attention, it is clear that there is ample space to ask many and varied questions, to take a lead from Miss Brodie leading her girls off to explore parts of the city hitherto unknown.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

I am grateful to Wilson Smith for generous advice and loading the Bibliography to Zotero, and to Richard Rodger for helpful comments on a draft of this material.

- 1 'Self-published' means an author arranges for material to be printed, usually without quality control over the content through peer review, or in some cases editorial oversight. 'Grey matter' is not considered to be technically published in the sense of being placed in copyright deposit libraries or having had an ISBN assigned even if it is laid out, printed, and distributed – it can therefore be quite difficult to obtain.
- 2 <https://auth.nls.uk/eresources>.
- 3 <https://ethos.bl.uk>.
- 4 C. Gross, *A Bibliography of British Municipal History* (Leicester 1987 [1966]); G. H. Martin and S. McIntyre, *A Bibliography of British and Irish Municipal History: Volume I, General Works* (Leicester 1972).

- 5 M. Noble, 'Bibliography of Urban History 2010', *Urban History*, 37, 3 (2010), pp. 499–551; 'Bibliography of Urban History 2009', *Urban History*, 36, 3 (2009), pp. 519–77; 'Bibliography of Urban History 2008', *Urban History*, 35, 3 (2008), pp. 524–73.
- 6 R. Rodger, *A Consolidated Bibliography of Urban History* (Cambridge 1986) uses 10; D. Aldcroft and R. Rodger, *Bibliography of European Economic and Social History* (Manchester 1986) has 12; Gross, *Bibliography of British Municipal History* has 19; Martin and McIntyre, *Bibliography of British and Irish Municipal History* has 28, of which one is 'Scotland'.
- 7 M. Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (London 2000 [1961]), p. 32.
- 8 R. J. Morris, 'In Search of Twentieth-Century Edinburgh', *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club, New Series*, 8 (2010), pp. 13–25 at p. 13.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 13.