A recent addition to Palgrave Macmillan’s “New Directions in Book History” series, Troy J. Bassett’s first monograph is indebted less to bibliographical studies than to micro-economics, and relies on bibliometric research of a very high order. The quantitative analysis prominent in The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Three-Volume Novel is applied principally to “At the Circulating Library,” the large-scale database of Victorian fiction issued in volume form, which has been built up since 2007 through the author’s own digital humanities project. Currently this includes entries on “16,374 titles, 3438 authors, and 508 publishers” and claims to account for “all of the two-, three-, and four-volume novels published between 1837 and 1901 in Great Britain” (p. 20).

The primary analysis of this data is carried out in the second chapter, “The Production of Multi-volume Fiction, 1837–1898” (the year of the appearance of the last Victorian multi-volume novel, according to Bassett), which alone occupies almost a third of the book and includes thirty-seven tables and four figures. Of these, all the figures and thirteen of the tables (2.11, 2.19~2.23, and 2.31~2.37) cover the entire 62-year period with regard to the most prolific publishing houses, nationality or gender of authors, modes of serialization, or a combination of these, with another twenty-one tables dividing that period into its seven constituent decades and offering three sets respectively covering number of titles (2.1~2.7), authorial gender (2.12~2.18), and most prolific publishers (2.24~2.30), while the remaining three tables (2.8~2.10) cover different sub-periods (e.g. 1837-78) and/or compare data from alternative sources (Simon Eliot’s Some Patterns and Trends in British Publishing and the relevant nineteenth-century issues of the Publishers’ Circular).

Some of the data sets used are, of course, likely to be less comprehensive than others: this is especially true of the quantities concerning titles published in installments for, as the author acknowledges, “whereas the number of two-, three-, and four-volume novels produced is now known with certainty, the total number of serializations of them, despite the number of periodicals examined
here, is still unknown” (p. 70). Although it occupies nearly four pages, Table 2.32 “Periodicals carrying multi-volume fiction titles, 1837–1898,” inevitably omits many relevant journals, particularly weekly issues, whether popular magazines like *Time* or *Tit-Bits* or regional newspapers such as the (Dundee) *People’s Journal* or (Cardiff) *Western Mail*. Moreover, it seems to me that Bassett entirely overlooks the Victorian mass publishing market, where many long melodramatic novels were first serialized in penny weekly fascicles before being repackaged on completion in cheap multi-volume formats. These would include “penny bloods” such as G.W.M. Reynolds’s various “Mysteries” and “Memoirs” series, which were initially serialized with an illustration in large double-column format over several years through the 1840s and 50s, as well as, from the 1870s, “penny dreadfuls” like George Emmett’s *Tom Wildrake’s Schooldays*, which was eventually reprinted in 319 chapters as a five-decker set at a shilling per yellowback volume. Indeed, even in the later 1890s, proletarian publishers like John Dicks were issuing multi-decker “People’s Edition” reprints in minuscule type of novels by Reynolds et al. at sixpence per paperback volume. Thus, while far from being valueless, Bassett’s bibliometric conclusions concerning the relation between serialization and multi-volume issue must be treated with a degree of caution: “From 1837 to 1898, 1589 titles out of 7272 total new multi-volume fiction titles appeared at some time as a serial (21.9%)” (p. 79); and “Before 1860, fewer than 10% of published multi-volume titles appeared previously as a serialization; after 1860, a quarter” were issued in this way (p. 77). (I should perhaps point out here that Bassett throughout makes generous acknowledgment of his use of my work on installment publication in *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Press* and elsewhere.)

The remaining three substantive chapters of the book, each around fifty pages in length and replete with fascinating detail, offer case studies that rely on research beyond the already rich field of information represented by Bassett’s “At the Circulating Library” database. Chapter 3, containing eight tables of its own, focuses on the publication of the novel in three volumes post octavo at a guinea and a half, by analyzing more than a hundred title accounts in the archives of Richard Bentley and Son, representing close to 15% of the triple-deckers thus issued by the firm during the Victorian
period, while Chapter 4 (with six tables) reveals the business model of one of the largest circulating libraries, by studying the surviving accounts of W.H. Smith and Son’s subscription service available nationwide at the firm’s railway bookstalls. Chapter 5 makes use of qualitative rather than quantitative sources to discuss the emergence of three narrative forms supplied in a slim single-volume alternative to the triple-decker in the final decades of the nineteenth century: the “juvenile” new romance associated with Stevenson; the “adult” novel of naturalism by George Moore; and publishers’ fiction series such as Arrowsmith’s “Bristol Library”, initially launched on back of the brief but stellar literary career of “Hugh Conway” (Frederick J. Fargus). Together, Bassett suggests, though they do not amount to “a comprehensive history of the rise of the one-volume format for new fiction”, these three examples do reflect how “attitudes toward the competing formats shifted to create a new advantageous position in opposition to the library novel” (pp. 185-86).

But even quantitative research requires some form of qualitative underpinning, and the specific research questions to be answered through data manipulation have to be justified by the human researcher. Here Bassett’s procedure is perhaps less robust. For one thing, the title he has chosen, with its echoes less of Gibbon’s Rome than of Jefferson Davis on the Confederacy, William L. Shirer on the Third Reich, or Lawrence James on the British Empire, does not really match the scope of the book itself, which is much more concerned with charting the extended dominance of the triple-decker than its origins or even its demise. As Bassett notes in his Introduction (pp. 2-3), the rise of the multi-volume novel in general dates not from the Victorian era but the mid-eighteenth century, while that in three volumes post-octavo belongs to the 1820s: already by the last year of that decade, according to Peter Garside and Rainer Schöwerling’s The English Novel 1770-1829, 48 out of 81 new fiction titles (59.3%) appeared as triple-deckers. Moreover, as Bassett’s Conclusion finally recognizes, the rapid decline of the format’s share in the fiction marketplace from the mid-1880s (“from 58.5% of new fiction titles in 1883 to 19.2%” by 1890, p. 228), cannot be explained by bibliometric analysis alone but demands a multi-factored approach that would include the marked
“increases in literacy, leisure, and disposable income” (ibid.) witnessed during that period. To these domestic sociological trends, influenced by the “world literature” perspective recently proposed by Franco Moretti among others, I would add international changes in intellectual property regimes and cultural trade balances not necessarily to the continued advantage of the British publishing industry.

And, in the end, perhaps such an analysis would be better facilitated not by the more static, hierarchical model that Bassett tends to adopt, where the various modes of prior installment issue and the various types of single-volume reprint are viewed as essentially subordinate to the prestigious format of the multi-volume library edition, than by an intrinsically more dynamic model. Notably options here would include: Robert Darnton’s concept of the literary communications circuit which situates production, distribution, and consumption in a recursive loop represented in the print industry principally by the roles of authors, publishers, and readers; or William St Clair’s formulation of the dominant national mentalités (at the cultural level), which are facilitated by the varying availability of different publication formats (at the economic level), which are in turn afforded by evolving intellectual property regimes (at the legal level). Despite both continuing to privilege the book over other print formats, either of these models would allow for a rather greater emphasis on sociological patterns of readership than can be found in Bassett’s account of the rise and fall of the Victorian three-volume novel, which instead tends to prioritize the role of the commercial distributor, whether publisher or librarian, even above that of the author.

But these are criticisms that come into play only once it has been recognized that Bassett, in assiduously assembling and meticulously analyzing a cornucopia of original and reliable data, has made a major contribution to the opening up of new lines of study of the Victorian publishing industry. Thus well informed, scholars will now be in a position to draw their own conclusions on a range of crucial questions regarding nineteenth-century print culture.
Works Cited


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