

Macmillan Cabinet Papers, 1957-1963, on CD-ROM contains copies of important public records relating to a pivotal period in contemporary British history in which Britain began important, and in many cases long-overdue, adjustments to the realities of its reduced international status. In domestic policy, the period saw far-reaching policy developments such as the Robbins Report on Education in 1961 and the onset of incomes policy and tripartite economic planning.

The editorial approach adopted in this set of CD-ROMs differs markedly from that taken in its earlier companion PROfiles 1964 - which consisted of fifteen CDs for just one year, covering a wide range of source material. Macmillan Cabinet Papers, 1957-1963 comprises three CD-ROMS. It has the significant advantage of being manageable and covering a longer period, but there is an inevitable sacrifice of depth which will require the serious researcher to look elsewhere - to microforms or to the original files.

The material included by the editors includes complete coverage of cabinet conclusions (cabinet minutes indexed under class CAB 128 at the Public Record Office) and cabinet memoranda (CAB 129). Cabinet conclusions comprise summaries of discussion in cabinet together with a note of decisions reached. They are essential documents for the student of British government - 'an inflexible instruction to the ministers concerned ... studied in government departments with the reverence generally reserved for sacred texts' (Kaufman 1997: 58). Cabinet memoranda are papers circulated to cabinet ministers. They cover every area of domestic and international concern to the government of the day. A small number of documents still considered too sensitive to be released are not included - but these have all been indicated.

So far, so good. But there have been complaints that cabinet minutes are 'a travesty [which] do not pretend to be an account of what actually takes place in cabinet' (Crossman 1975: 198). A fascinating study by Lowe (1997) recently highlighted the difference between the minutes actually taken at cabinet (the existence of which continues to be strenuously denied by the Cabinet Office) and those published. The truth is that, useful as they can be, cabinet minutes are notorious for concealing almost as much as they reveal. For example, the cabinet conclusions immediately preceding the 'night of the long knives' in July 1962, when Macmillan sacked a third of his cabinet, give little hint of the coming purge. If we are to understand the policy developments of the Macmillan years we need more than just the cabinet minutes and cabinet papers. Luckily the editors of this CD-ROM have recognised this and have included a range of material from other files, something not hinted at in the title - an unusual instance of a publisher under-selling a publication.

The editors have rightly decided that the papers of the prime minister's private office (PREM 11) are a natural complement to the records already discussed. These provide important insights into the formation of government policy. They describe activities outside the formal cabinet and include the views of advisers, civil servants and the Conservative Party, as well as recording meetings with international statesmen such as de Gaulle, Krushchev, and Kennedy. Yet the inclusion of these records has posed a problem. The 3,510 PREM 11 files covering the Macmillan administration would have filled 35 CD-ROMs. Instead, 166 files have been chosen. The selection is biased in the direction of foreign and defence policy. This is an understandable decision, since it reflects both the priority placed upon foreign policy by Macmillan himself (see Macmillan 1971, 1972 and 1973) and the interests of the main potential market for CD-ROM, but slightly exasperating for the historian of domestic affairs.

This bias is also seen in the choice of four additional files from the CAB 134 cabinet committee minutes.

In addition to the files, the CD-ROMs include two other features. Firstly, there is a useful index of ministers and officials for the period which gives details of posts held and dates of occupation. Secondly there are five introductory essays written by the editors:

- 'The Challenges of Affluence' by Mark Jarvis and John Turner
- 'The Economy and Domestic Affairs' by David Tyler
- 'Europe, 1957-1963' by Richard Lamb
- 'Decolonisation under Macmillan' by Philip Murphy
- 'Cold War, Anglo-American Relations & Defence' by G Staerck

These essays help to introduce the main themes of the period and provide hypertext links to particularly important files (although, rather irritatingly, when you return from these to the essay you lose your place in it). Equally irritating is the fact that the option to output the text to Microsoft Word does not seem to work. In addition, the standard of the essays is rather variable. Richard Lamb's discussion of Europe, for example, is a concise summary of events and is well-referenced. But David Tyler's discussion of economic policy developments is written at a rather basic level and is over-dependent on lengthy quotations from the underlying sources.

The introductory essays may be of some interest to students since they do offer students a way into the enormous detail of the underlying primary sources. But how many students will this apply to? For it is as a research tool that this CD will really prove its worth. As a teaching aid it will be of limited use. To have copies of important cabinet conclusions might certainly prove helpful to undergraduates in case study exercises. But the likelihood is that this material will be accessed not by the student but by the teacher, who can then provide copies in print or electronic form. The only realistic exception to this will be undergraduates undertaking final year dissertations and masters students. Here the student will have enough knowledge of the material's context to be able to use the records on the CDs effectively, but, even so, they will almost certainly need tuition in using government records to support their argument, in the structuring of these records and in the means by which they may be accessed.

There are three main methods of accessing the collection. Firstly, users can browse through class lists as they would at the Public Record Office. The file descriptions and other details (keywords suggesting the scope of its documents, details of people concerned and, in the case of cabinet minutes, a copy of the agenda) are available by clicking on the file reference. This is all invaluable information and it is easy to page through the files to view it. However, the omission of the file description from the initial list is a shame as it is generally far more meaningful than the PRO reference.

Secondly, the user can browse through a new consolidated version of the original annual. This is fully searchable and contains hyperlinks to the underlying file details. The result is an index which is browseable, but unwieldy. There are also pull-down lists of significant people and subjects of the period which can suggest fruitful avenues to pursue.

Thirdly, there is a search engine that is relatively easy to use and is quick at returning results. This operates across the full text of the file descriptions and the introductory essays. Full Boolean searching facilities (AND, OR, and NOT operators) are provided. The engine does not support phrase searches, but does provide a proximity search. Unfortunately, but inevitably, it cannot search the text of documents in the underlying files since these are stored not as text files but as scanned images.

Double-clicking on a hit produced by the search, or on a hyperlink produced by one of the other means of access, displays the description of the file. A further double click enables the user to view the original documents. The speed with which the image appears seems to have improved markedly since PROfiles 1964. Once the first page in the file appears it is possible to move forwards and backwards through the remaining pages, and to jump to the end, the beginning or to a specified page.

However they are accessed, documents are presented in the form of scanned images in TIFF format. This provides a polarised black and white image. As with any reproduced documents, the quality of the image is dependent on the nature of the original material. The files in question consist of a mixture of typescript sheets bound into volumes and loose documents. In some cases tightly bound typescript sheets are rather obscured in the inner margin. In other cases the original documents were of inferior quality - often carbon copies in the PREM II files. These have sometimes not reproduced well. Hand-written annotations, particularly where they were made in coloured ink and pencil, can be difficult to read. Occasionally there are standard problems of show-through associated with copying printed sources. Nonetheless, despite a rather convoluted scanning process (in which the documents are first microfilmed and then scanned), on the whole the quality of the images is surprisingly good. Documents can be viewed at 5 different resolutions between 20% and 100% - some seem to produce a crisper image than others, but this seems to vary between files. Also, there is an inevitable trade off between legibility and the area of displayed document. I used a 17" screen and viewing the images on this was manageable. A 15" screen would have made life very difficult. Incidentally, the quality of off-prints is very good (for some reason printing produces a clearer image than that displayed) and any user familiar with the high price of photo-copying at the PRO would be well-advised to start their search for printed copies of cabinet documents here.

The overall technical standard of this CD-ROM is generally high, although it does have two annoying features. Firstly, whilst the fact that it does not run directly from the CD is an advantage in terms of speed of access to its indexes, it is not possible to override the location of its directory on your hard drive. Secondly, it is very mouse intensive and the opportunity to use tab and enter keys to select a file from lists is not provided.

Nevertheless, Macmillan Cabinet Papers, 1957-1963, on CD-ROM deserves to be used widely by contemporary historians, particularly those interested in British foreign policy. It provides an useful starting point for research into the period. It also provides an convenient resource for postgraduates and for undergraduates undertaking specialised studies in modern British history. For those of us who regularly travel to Kew it will at least go some way towards reducing the small fortune that we spend on train fares. However, it is foreign scholars who will benefit most from this collection and, presumably, it will be foreign institutions who will be most likely to stump up £3000 to buy it.

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