

# *An Early Science Library and the Provision of Textbooks: The Ecole Polytechnique, 1794–1815*

by MARGARET BRADLEY

## *The origins and foundation of the Ecole Polytechnique*

A study of archival material in the *Ecole Polytechnique*, one of the élite schools of French higher education, has revealed library and book supply problems in 1795 which provide some interesting parallels and contrasts with modern problems in higher education. It was in the wake of the French revolution that there first emerged the concept of a university-type education open to all on the basis of a competitive entrance examination with state grants for students. The *Ecole Polytechnique* by drawing on the best students from all over France and by employing scientists of world class reached an enviably high standard within a few years of its foundation and became the model for polytechnic schools in other countries on the continent and America. This paper focusses on one aspect of the problem of launching a new university-type institution, that of the support of learning by the supply of books.

The French revolution had far-reaching social and educational implications. Education, which under the old regime had been largely in Church hands, now became the concern of the state. In higher education there was fundamental rethinking on the place of science in education, partly for ideological reasons and partly because science had proved its utility in the early stages of the revolutionary wars. The *Ecole Polytechnique* came into being partly to provide a higher education in science but more particularly to train military and civil engineers whose previous training had been more by apprenticeship than formal instruction. This school was established in September 1794, as the *Ecole Centrale des Travaux Publics*. There three hundred students were to study mathematics and the basic sciences common to all branches of engineering. In the original plans for teaching within the school considerable stress was placed on a practical approach.<sup>2</sup> With free education and grants for all students, it was expected that they would be able to live in Paris near the

The author is Visiting Research Fellow in the Unit for the History of Science, University of Kent, Canterbury England.

*Libri* 1976: vol. 26: no. 3: pp. 165–180.