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The Invention of Counting

This talk will consider the process by which the world's first centralised, quantified, consistent time series of literacy attainments was brought into being. It will examine the methodological problems encountered by the early Registrars General and their staff and how they sought to overcome them. Their work will be placed in the context of the 'avalanche of numbers' that characterised the 1820s and 1830s. Particular attention will be paid to the difficulties with time and with networks and how the failure to resolve these influenced both contemporary and historical understandings of the dynamics of nineteenth-century literacy.