

# Reviews in History

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## Manifesto (1995 original)

### Introduction

Thanks to the enterprise of its Academic Secretary, the Institute of Historical Research has obtained funding required to launch an electronic journal, 'Reviews in History'. A part-time Deputy-Editor, Anne Shepherd, is already in post. Preparations are under way to appoint an editorial board, to consult widely with the history profession, to alert publishers and to master the technology for circulation and diffusion.

While we are not the first electronic publication offering scholars reviews in history, there are several features of our journal that are distinctive: To review scholarly work on the history of the United Kingdom (and eventually of Europe as a whole) with integrity, more rapidly and at far greater length than is normal for printed journals. Above all (and for reasons elaborated at length in this manifesto) we intend to offer authors a right of reply, transmitted with the review. Finally, our editorial board will be large and structured, as best we can, to represent by sex, by age, and by academic interest, the body of scholars who make up the historical profession.

Selections for review will be confined for the most part to books (but possibly to seminal articles) that in the opinion of the Editorial Board, could be classified as significant works of interpretation and reinterpretation within the manifold and evolving subfields of modern history.

At the Institute we are now constructing the organisational foundations and establishing the ground rules for this promising initiative. When our support from public funds runs out in two years time, 'Reviews in History' will be recognised as useful for the advance of the subject and will be commercially viable. Meanwhile, we certainly need all the help and advice that historians, publishers, journalists and people of experience and goodwill may care to offer.

### Electronic Journals & Journals

Obviously ideas for an electronic journal are not new although they have emerged to take advantage of opportunities offered by the Internet. Furthermore, the challenge and threat from electronic modes of publishing to established historical journals is currently under discussion among editors and their readers concerned to ensure the continued vitality of journals in traditional form. From the data submitted to a session of the recent World Congress of Historians in Montreal, I can report that something close to a thousand English language history journals are probably now in print. Apparently only three hundred subscribers need sign up to ensure the viability of a publication and the low financial barrier to entry into the market together with the persistent and seemingly irreversible tendencies towards specialisation in 'post-modern' historical scholarship implies that

trends in the foundation of new historical journals are set to continue at least in the short run.

Historians are all aware that the conceptual framework for the construction of historical knowledge is changing rapidly even though their research methods have successfully withstood the assaults from relativism and the linguistic turn. At the same time the presentation and delivery of history is being driven in new directions by technology. Tapes, films, television and videos are now all recognised parts of the apparatus for scholarly forms of communication in history. Professional historians and their students begin to interact easily through electronic media, which also provide opportunities for the construction and diffusion of historical knowledge in entirely new ways that already point towards the obsolescence of printed journals. For example, entire back and future issues of journals will soon be available in machine readable form. Bibliographies and databases of articles and reviews, easily and effectively referenced by information servers, will allow historians and their students to read and to print out articles that appear on their personal computers.

Despite the proliferation of new titles, historical journals have hardly changed in format, content and function for several decades. They offer a variety of articles, documents, reviews and news to highly differentiated readerships of historians whose academic interests and intellectual identities are represented by 'their' journal or journals. For particular 'tribes', and indeed for history as a whole, editors of historical journals organise and present knowledge in a form demanded by the discipline; offer guarantees of quality control and help the profession to accumulate an archive of scholarly writing. Implicitly journals also offer peer group appraisal of research that is significant for the making of academic reputations; and, we can now add, for university and departmental rankings in research assessment exercises conducted by the Funding Councils and by other bodies who supply funds to support historical research.

Critics of the way printed journals and their editors serve the profession welcome the challenge and the threat posed by electronic media to what they perceive as established structures of power. Apart from the difficulties of taking a laptop to bed, 'radicals' concede nothing to the argument for the retention of paper and printing as the mode of communication. Appealing to Foucault and in effect repeating populist sentiments now voiced eloquently by that now famous historian, Newt Gingrich, they welcome the undermining of quality control, as well as other traditional and often more dubious claims to 'authority' over the diffusion of historical knowledge. 'Populist' academics present electronic forms of communication as a force for the democratisation not only of politics but also of the university. They recognise little need for quality controllers, gatekeepers and peers who, they observe, are too often white, male and elderly and intellectually conservative.

Clearly the electronic revolution in the publication and diffusion of historical knowledge carries in its train political problems, controversy and the need to preserve valued attributes embodied in our great tradition of historical journals. To this end the Institute proposes to convene a conference of editors, publishers and others to discuss the issues in the spring of 1996. Meanwhile, seizing the moment it has embarked on its own project for a new electronic journal, 'Reviews in History'.

### **Why "Reviews In History"**

Granted the need and the opportunity to venture into electronic publishing, why concentrate upon reviews? This is a manifesto not an apologia but my brief reply to that entirely pertinent question refers to the perception, widespread among historians, that too many reviews of scholarly publications that appear particularly in newspapers and weeklies, but also alas in academic journals, provide an unsatisfactory service for readers, are unhelpful to authors, disappoint publishers and are an unreliable guide to the contents, quality and significance of many history books now published. Of course, any bold generalisation will not apply with the same force to all areas of the subject. But to say how and why these assertions might be justified requires elaboration upon 'reviews, reviewers

and reviewing', which will, I anticipate, strike chords among the profession at large.

Book reviews accompanied the rise of the author in the 18th century and were originally addressed to the elite who read and purchased books across a range of subjects in the arts and sciences. Before the 20th century, most book reviews were not, however, written by scholars for scholars. Reviews engaged with a work of history in ways that exposed the interest of a book and the erudition and style of the reviewer to a confined and educationally homogeneous reading public. Although today's educated public are far larger and more heterogeneous, reviews in newspapers and periodicals still attempt to perform something like that same function.

In their columns history continues to compete for attention with the whole range of writing in the humanities, social studies as well as more popular forms of natural science. For entirely understandable reasons most professional historians converse about the book review sections of our quality newspapers, weeklies and periodicals, in ways that can be depicted as both disdainful and apprehensive. They regret that more space is not made over to history. They often wonder how and why allocations across subjects are made and ponder still more over the particular books selected for review which often appear to them to be anything but seminal or even representative of trends and interests within the discipline as they know it. In general reviews for the media are extremely short. Reviewing in history is perceived to be conducted by a 'tenured' coterie of articulate literati whose credentials to summarise, contextualise and appraise the many varieties of history they comment upon seem questionable to scholars whose disposition and training leads them to insist upon proven expertise as the basis for writing reviews.

For reviewers, editors (and for publishers pleased to have their products drawn to the attention of a larger market) these commonplace critiques are dismissed as irrelevant and as motivated by envy. Are they not doing their best to popularise history? Is a well turned out review which may be a pleasure to read, an essay in its own right, not effective for that purpose? Editors obviously prefer reviewers who can meet deadlines. They maintain that their publics are often as interested in the reviewers as they are in books often written by rather anonymous authors.

Newspapers and weeklies do perform useful advertising functions for history and other humanities, but mutual incomprehension seems to separate historians from those who control the space and selections for reviews in what John Osborne once referred to as the posh Sundays and weeklies. Editors certainly do try to cater for a market far wider than academe. For their part historians are uneasily aware that what is often little more than opinion transmitted by the media enters insidiously into securing jobs, tenure, promotion and the making of academic reputations. That may well be right because time is short for hard pressed and increasingly specialised academics. Headlines are quickly assimilated. Sound bites are easy to hear. Pungent, witty and insubstantial phrases are often remembered. Most but not all the reviews they publish may well be read as irrelevant for serious scholarly discourse and for professional affairs. But are reviews in academic journals really superior?

In important respects and for the most part - yes. They are written by scholars for scholars; are usually longer, and commissioned by editors from panels of reviewers with credentials or at least some claims to the expertise and authority required to comment upon books in their own and neighbouring domains of scholarship. Unfortunately the litany of complaints about reviews published by historical journals is if anything more widespread than the familiar dismissal of egotistical journalism masquerading as scholarship. For example, the pages allocated by journals to reviews is also regarded as inadequate. (Some devote none at all). Most editors apparently rarely reconsider the established allocation of space between articles, notes and documents on the one hand and reviews on the other. Alas, the capacity of journals increasing rapidly in number has hardly kept pace with the flow of monographs and texts in history. Too many scholarly books are never reviewed

anywhere. Others are allocated an inadequate number of pages both within and across journals. Could the decline could be checked if editors allocated more space to book reviews and less to articles and notes? Why are they not providing more opportunities for historians to discourse in print about monographs, texts and major reinterpretations in history? Why is this form of scholarly interchange accorded lower weight than, say, yet another article by Kingsley Amis on 'Shipbuilding in the Brabant'?

### **The Role Of The Review Editor**

Review Editor's colleagues do appreciate that the post is not an appealing one and recognise that the failure of reviewers to deliver to order (or at all) is behind those long lead times between the publication of books and the appearance of reviews. But historians would like to be assured that systematic harassment goes on and that sooner or later authors might perhaps be told the name of their tardy reviewers, who after all could reject the call to review or occasionally return a book. Finding the right or even competent reviewers is certainly not easy. For some books the refusal rate may be disappointingly high. Nevertheless, Review Editors might also be more open with their colleagues about the basis upon which they select books and reviewers for the sections of journals under their control. Such policies could be outlined in print and reconsidered from time to time in the light of feedback from a journal's evolving and often dimly conceived readership. How many British journals survey and solicit their readers' views for this and other purposes?

Some of the obloquy suffered by Review Editors does, however, belong to publishers. They know that favourable reviews sell books and may suggest new lines of research for their forthcoming publications lists. Publishers are alive to comments about misprints, price and other features of a book, but are they sensitive enough to the scholarly purposes served by reviews? For example, what sanctions do publishers bring to bear on journals who fail to review their authors in reasonable compass? Do they devote adequate proportions of their budgets for book promotion to the distribution of review copies to clearly appropriate and potentially interested journals not only in Britain but also in America, Europe and elsewhere in the now wide world of historical scholarship? Are they not excessively impressed with advertising in the form of lists, brochures, leaflets and copy in a limited range of journals? Such expenditures may well be as ineffective commercially as they are intellectually for purposes of supplying serious and processed information to historians.

Yet intellectual kudos attached to book reviews is surely lower than it deserves to be or could become? Review Editors could do more to raise the status (and the dignity) of reviewers by exercising closer control over the quality and the speed of submission. Many seem unable or unwilling to offer authors a right to reply; perhaps because they know that authors prudentially adopt a stoical stance even when offered space for 'self pleading' at a trial in print where reviewers invariably occupy the high ground. At very least Editors could (and perhaps should) solicit, file and take note for future reference of authors' comments upon published reviews of books that may take years of research and reflexion to write, compared to anything between the odd hour and a couple of days that reviewers habitually devote to composing a review.

### **The Good Review - Definition & Context**

Incentives to allocate more intellectual effort to this important professional task are surely not strong enough? Editorial control seems sporadic and inadequate. Space constraints are too rigid and time constraints too loose. Small wonder that complaints with reviews surface frequently in conversations among historians and that from time to time acrimonious discord explodes in public between the reviewed and the reviewer to the amusement of all and the enlightenment of none. In the long term the ultimate tribunal for a book's reputation are its readers and users. Meanwhile too many professional historians feel that they and their books are entitled to more serious and more

responsible attention than they currently receive.

Vituperation and revenge as well as gratitude and anticipated repayments for favours rendered are the personal rewards that accrue to writers of academic reviews. While small sums of money change hands for refereeing manuscripts for publishers, nothing is offered by journals (even profitable journals) for publicising and appraising books appearing in print. The retention of a book (even a costly book) is hardly adequate recompense for the time spent on composing a proper review. Above all, book reviews (however scholarly) contribute too little to the making of academic reputations. Most historians refer to Notes published in journals on their C.V.s. Some also cite book reviews which are normally disregarded by selection committees of their peers. Indeed most historians (here and in the United States) usually list the journals they review for and seldom cite or quote favourable reviews of their own work when making applications for positions, promotions and grants. Presumably this unsatisfactory situation (which effectively denigrates the status and lowers the quality of book reviews) has come about because Deans and Vice-Chancellors and many among the Professoriate, regard the genre as 'contaminated' in varying degrees by friendship, patronage, egotism, malice and other extraneous considerations.

Definitions of the well made book review are beside the point but perhaps a majority of academic historians might assent to a short 'declaration of principles' that are in some measure, already maintained by most historical journals. First and foremost the review should contain an accurate précis of the major theses suggested and themes addressed by a book. Good summaries are not easy to construct and require the reviewer to digest the entire publication and to connect its arguments to its scaffolding of sources and information. Recourse to dust jackets, prefaces and conclusions will not be enough for the purpose. Some books (particularly collections of essays) are not easy to précis. Indeed the job of summarising and faithfully representing history books is often better done by and in publications read largely by university librarians and it these journals that may be more influential in promoting the sale of books.

Secondly any review should endeavour to contextualise the book in terms of its field, genre and approach to history; and when relevant with reference to other texts (possibly to earlier publications by the author) within the same or interdependent domains of history.

Reviews are commissioned by editors on behalf of the readers of particular and often specialised historical journals. Authors of books and historians reading reviews will not expect the same sort of précis, contextualisation and appraisal across journals. Obviously, to take an example, the strengths, defects and omissions of a historical study of German railways will not be the same for readers of *Transport History* as they are for, say, a journal of military history. Specialised perspectives provided they are elaborated within the overall context treated by a book and intentions of authors are well understood. Most reviews would be more valuable if they could be written less with experts in mind (who will read the book anyway) and rather more for a wider readership of historians who require carefully processed information and a guided entre into hinterlands of scholarship that they need to visit but have no time to inhabit.

Authors always prefer praise to criticism but as intellectuals can distinguish the laudatory but lazy review from a serious critical engagement with their ideas and intentions. Some reviews, however flattering, are not worth the paper because the reviewer has read little more than the name, credentials and status of the author. Negative reviews which niggle away at style or at references can easily create the impression of incompetence and carelessness. Unless slippage in footnoting seriously compromises the author's arguments and until reviewers outline and defend their own canons of literary style, the limited space allowed for reviews suggests that such corrections are best confined to an appendix. Better still they could be communicated privately to the author who will decide whether they are useful or merely a pedantic substitute for serious engagement with

historical arguments.

What scholarly journals should almost certainly leave to newspapers, weeklies and periodicals are book reviews that use scarce space to compose short essays, however brilliant, of tangential relevance to the book (or even books) that a historian has ostensibly been commissioned to review. The burdens of writing a book and a review are hardly commensurate and such forays are often ego trips fashioned to demonstrate the intellectual vitality of scholars who have for one perfectly good reason or another abandoned research. Essays, surveys and general reflexions have their place in historical discourse but not in the overcrowded reviews sections of journals and should surely not appear at the expense of those attempting to present the fruits of their research to the profession at large?

Scholarly reviews will only be written by those with intellectual reputations, integrity and a sense of responsibility towards history. It remains the difficult and unenviable task of Review Editors to select the right people and to promote and cultivate these very qualities. They soon learn the historians they select are never simply academics with relevant and reputable credentials. They are also people with biases, ideologies and approaches to history to uphold. As reigning experts they also have territory to defend and intellectual capital to maintain, younger scholars often wish to occupy that territory and to command its heights. Placed temporarily in a position of authority reviewers are accorded the power to wound, to flatter and to cultivate authors who will for the most part silently rejoice or meekly accept whatever is directed at their cherished and painfully written works.

### **To Conclude**

Ultimately the standard of reviewing in history depends upon the intellectual and personal qualities of reviewers commissioned by busy, unpaid Review Editors. In an ideal world reviewers would possess relevant expertise as well as the scholarship required to appreciate books in the round. They would approach books in a spirit of deference and attempt to promote (and to meditate in) a co-operative dialogue between authors and their readers. Alas, for Review Editors, the historical profession is full of real human beings with careers to make and reputations to maintain. They cannot avoid historians with adversarial urges who are naturally devoted to their own interests and their style of doing and writing history. Rivalry is, however, not only an indispensable but perhaps also a necessary component of the culture of the historical profession. Review Editors might, however, seek to harness and restrain people's competitive qualities by asking reviewers to specify their own ideological preconceptions and biases in print. They might also do more to countervail the blatant attempts to use reviews in order to secure or to exercise patronage. Journals should be more concerned than they are too often perceived to be protecting authors from misrepresentation and irresponsibility. Perhaps publishers could help by inviting authors to state clearly in their prefaces what in their view would constitute valid and serious grounds for scholarly criticism and disagreement. Reviewers could then be invited to cite and then heed or ignore the parameters set by authors for scholarly discourse.

The Editorial Board of 'Reviews in History' will try to be vigilant in the pursuit of balance and fairness and to offer intellectually stimulating reviews. New information technology, which allows for space, speed and author's replies and further discussion, should go some way towards setting improved standards for reviewing and (through that important process of mediation) for the writing of history in general. For this, our initial stage of preparation for a launch, please offer us your expert comments and advice.

Patrick O'Brien  
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Editor Elect, Reviews in History

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