

On the changing of the editor: some valedictory reflections

This is the last part of the *Review* that I will see through the press. In all, I have had charge of it for 21 years.¹ Having been Editor for so long, some have regarded my departure as equivalent to the flight of the Ravens from the Tower of London or the abandonment of Gibraltar by its Barbary apes. However, my departure is no calamity and I am pleased to say that Paul Warde has accepted the pilot's seat.

May I therefore be allowed to fill the final pages of this part of the *Review* with some valedictory reflections and, indeed, express some thanks to those with whom I have worked?

I ought to begin by saying that I never intended to serve so long. When I prepared Gordon Mingay's obituary for the *Review* in 2006, I recall thinking that his period of editorship (11 years) was excessive and not something I wanted to repeat. In fact I have exceeded Mingay's term handsomely, in part for a reason I will mention later.²

As editor I was committed to a broad church reflecting both agricultural and rural history, cultural history and the newcomer to the table, environmental history. Distinctions between agricultural history (economic) and rural (social) seemed (and still seem) to me to be fundamentally unhelpful. There are a few cold-war warriors who still fight the war between the two. Whilst an editor can only accept what he is sent (and our name, and a reputation for staid and old-fashioned agricultural history, was sometimes a hindrance in the beginning), I have never rejected material because it fell outside some arbitrary boundary (the exception being contemporary development studies). Of course, no editor ever gets the right supply of material to achieve the ideal balance, but over a period of years I hope that the contents of the *Review* have given a sense of what the discipline can and ought to be.

That said, the domestic discipline has changed in ways which have, in retrospect, been unhelpful. Work in the classic area of what has been called 'cow and plough history' – the study of production – has largely ceased. Three reasons can be offered for this. The first is the disappearance of Economic History as a university discipline. Appointments at any level of the discipline are rare. There are virtually no departments of Economic and Social History left in Great Britain (LSE and Glasgow may be the only ones). Postgraduates would be ill-advised to work in a subject area where the opportunities for employment are close to nil unless they can disguise their work as something else. The second is the extinction of the extra-mural departments and the third the decline – nay, disappearance – of the specialist agricultural

¹ The first volume I saw through the press was volume 47 (1999).

² I note that two of the founding editors of *Rural*

History are still in post after thirty years, which perhaps suggests a certain lack of stamina on my part.

college in which some knowledge of the history of agriculture was seen as a desirable part of a rounded vocational education. That agriculture has been in the doldrums for much of that time has perhaps not helped. One important consequence of this is that we know relatively little about the agriculture of the twentieth century, certainly after 1945 as the research power has not been there whilst what everybody once knew has slipped out of memory and into history. The work that is being done is often carried out under the guise of veterinary history or even animal welfare. Key industries lack serviceable accounts. I have sometimes felt that there was more activity in medieval rural history than twentieth-century rural history: certainly medievalists regard rural history as something with which their students ought to be at least acquainted in a way that historians of the twentieth century do not.

It is also, of course, a generational matter. The younger generation have often been concerned with the experience of agricultural labour, much of it focused on farm servants, much of it taking a gendered approach. The *Review* has carried some important work in both this field and on poor relief, especially under the Old Poor Law. The mindset which regards farm servants as important and worthy of attention tends to disregard farmers: it certainly finds nothing of interest in the ways in which upper-class and monied individuals used the countryside for recreation (for parkland, hunting, shooting and the like) and so recent work on how the countryside was shaped for non-productive uses is, at best, patchy. Nor has there been much writing in the *Review* on popular recreations and the tensions they brought, nor on the politics of the countryside generally. There is much more that needs to be done in all of these fields. It seems likely though that the next generation will be concerned with environmental issues including weather and sustainability, and that may bring many of them back to the nuts and bolts of 'cow and plough history'. Crop rotations may be the coming thing. Just wait and see!

In terms of geographical coverage, I was once hailed whilst standing over a photocopier in a library by someone who introduced themselves as a member of our Society and said that they liked the *Review*, but it never contained anything on Yorkshire. (This conversation, I ought to add, took place in Leeds.) It is a more serious matter that whilst we have carried important papers on both Scotland and Wales, there have been too few of them, and Ireland has barely featured, much to my regret. Of course, this both reflects the character of the profession in those countries and the local opportunities for publication, but one would have liked more.

This leads me to one of the great sea changes in the character of the *Review* over the past two decades, and one which not all its readers have been happy about. We have attracted far more material from colleagues based in Europe writing about their own countries. This has often filled gaps in the work of British historians on both productivity and twentieth-century agricultural and rural history. We have occasionally made forays into Africa and North America, and very occasionally Asia. In my view the internationalist tendency in the *Review* over the past twenty years has been entirely beneficial even if the papers that it generates often bring with them editorial challenges.

The establishment of contacts between the separate national rural history communities has been one of the most welcome developments of the past two decades and more. It started with the CORN network based at Gent, whose prime mover was Erik Thoen, and subsequently PROGRESSORE led by Gérard Béaur at the CRS (CNRS/EHESS) in Paris. These brought together people who, one suspects, were largely unaware of each other, their interests and

publications. The two book series they spawned are a lasting achievement (although as the editor of the *Review*, I tended to look at them and wish that some of their best material had come my way!). It was on these foundations that the BAHS launched an international conference at the University of Sussex in September 2010. This meeting attracted much larger numbers of speakers than we envisaged, and out of it emerged the European Rural History Organisation with its biennial conferences. As the United Kingdom slips into political isolationism, this is a development we need to maintain. I have to say though that the New Internationalism perhaps generated less material for the *Review* than I originally envisaged, the call of publications with a higher international standing and national periodicals proving too strong.

There are a large number of people I need to thank – authors apart, for their patience and occasionally perseverance with me – for their contribution to the *Review* over the past two decades.

First the Book Review editors with whom I have worked: John Walton, Henry French, Bryony McDonagh and now John Morgan. There is more to this job than meets the eye: not just the management of the books as they come in, but increasingly the chasing of publishers to ensure that we get them in the first place and of the reviewers to ensure that we receive their review in a reasonable time. I am grateful to all of them, and for their patience with the editor when an email arrived asking for more reviews to ensure that the issue in proof did not appear with blank pages at the end.

Second, the referees. I have not even tried to total up how many people I have asked to referee papers. I must have had over 500 papers pass through my hands, the majority of which have received two reports. A very few people have refused my request for a report. Some I have relied upon and sent papers to time after time. They and the many others, often personally unknown to me, sometimes writing outside their area of expertise, have invariably taken considerable pains to read the paper I sent them and prepare a report ‘suitable for the author’s eyes’. I have always been impressed by the care that referees take, even with papers which are pretty dire, looking for the positives, making suggestions of changes for the author’s benefit even when the paper was not going to be recommended for publication. It is here that the Republic of Letters is truly found.

Third, throughout we have used Carnegie Publishing of Lancaster as our setter and print buyer (for a long time they did the dispatch too), and at Carnegie much of this work has fallen on Rachel Clarke. A long time ago (a *very* long time ago), she and I agreed not to dwell on each others’ mistakes. This was, to use the language of modern warfare, an asymmetrical arrangement. Rachel made few mistakes but rescued me from many more. The elegance of the *Review*, the quality of its layout and presentation, is largely down to her. Perhaps I should note that we have been doing this so long that when we started out, we posted paper proofs out in envelopes (and I would sometimes drop the corrected proofs back at Carnegie’s offices) which now seems positively antediluvian. I am ever so grateful to have had Rachel to rely on. Working with her has been a pleasure. Thank you Rachel.

Fourth, that we have a good website, and that the *Review* is available both there and on JSTOR, and on publication on the Ingenta platform, is largely due to John Broad who negotiated the original agreements and organized the scanning of the *Review* when it was still a fairly novel thing to do.

Fifth, I am grateful to many generations of the Executive Committee of the British Agricultural History Society who trusted me to get on with it, accepted my applications for additional funding for longer parts and, when pressed, expressed satisfaction with what I was doing.

Finally, that I continued as the editor of the *Review* into a second decade is largely because I recruited Catherine Glover as, first, copyeditor and publications manager, then as administrator of Rural History 2010 and finally she became my wife. She took over all the work of dealing with authors once their texts had been prepared for setting, giving them a last (and frequently tough-minded) read-through, handling the proofs and the management of the website. The *Review* changed from being an evening and weekend job for the editor (often conducted on train journeys) to being a cottage enterprise. Catherine's contribution has never been properly acknowledged in the *Review* partly because neither I nor the Executive Committee ever came up with a term which was sufficiently embracing to encompass her contribution. She has brought to the *Review* not only sharp copy-editing and eagle-eyed proofreading but also a superior understanding of hyphenation (an author once told me that I couldn't hyphenate, and he may have been right). Many authors have had their papers improved in small ways by her. A good number have had their maps redrawn by her. She pointed out to one author that a particular linguistic coinage could only be found in one place on the internet, and that was in a blog he had written. The coinage was disallowed – by mutual agreement of course. In recent years she has handled all our dealings with Rachel at Carnegie. It is very much to the *Review's* advantage that she will continue in this role for the next few years.

Perhaps I might end by channelling my inner Yorkshireman. Editors are a vital part of the publication process, as the writer's friend, as the ultimate quality assurance, as the manager of the process. They might take papers and put them through the press unaltered; they might also require the author to make wholesale changes. They might, from time to time, rewrite papers. I have done all of these: I have, in addition, occasionally done additional research for authors where I have felt that there was more to be said. This all goes on after the paper has been submitted to a journal in its 'final' form.

The contribution of the editor to the publication process has never really been recognized by university hierarchies (no one became a vice chancellor by being a journal editor), by the REF and most recently by Plan S. Leaving the latter to one side for a moment, I think that the standing of the editor and the recognition of the value he or she brings to publications has probably diminished over the time I have been editor of the *Review*. There is now the belief, found amongst some academics, certainly amongst some academic librarians and in particular amongst some funders that journals (and publishers in general) are essentially parasitic on the research process, selling (through their subscriptions) work which, in some form or another, has already been paid for out of public or charitable funds. Funded research, it is held, should be free to air (as it were) so everyone can read it for free at the moment of publication. (Of course, many of the papers I have published have come from independent scholars, working outside the universities and funded out of their own pockets.)

We achieved an acceptable halfway house with Gold and Green Open Access. One element of this concordat was the emergence of the University Repository, filled with unedited papers, often withheld from the public gaze until after the paper has appeared in print, which makes the repository text redundant. As a means of spending money at a time when the universities

had some, it was ideal. We now have Plan S which insists that *all* work in a journal which prints *any* publicly funded research should be available free to all readers from the moment of publication.³ Various sanctions are threatened for journals which do not fall into line. Of course, this is a manoeuvre against the big Science journal publishers operating in areas whose whole model (and scale) of funding is quite different to that of the Humanities and who have often been criticized for making unreasonable profits: but no distinction is drawn between journals in different fields or different proprietorships. There is no recognition that the editing of journals in the Humanities is a voluntary, often unremunerated, spare-time activity.

The implications of this for Humanities journals in particular do not need to be spelt out: once the contents of journals are freely available online, there will, on the one hand, be no need to purchase the journal because it is all there on the web for the curious to find. On the other hand there will be no income with which to support the editorial process, the setting of papers or even pay for the hosting of the website on which the journal is published. Of course, in these conditions it will be impossible to support a print version.

So the journal has shifted from being the facilitator, the channel through which research is disseminated after a rigorous and often competitive process, to being the enemy, withholding material from the public and fellow academics unless they pay a fee or a subscription to access it. Of course, I favour open access. It is a great Enlightenment project for the dissemination of knowledge. But eighteenth-century publishers did not print their books and give them away. Like certain other contemporary political projects, it is a case of having one's cake and eating it: a populist policy lacking practicality.

Having been at the sharp end of this, I cannot see how the project can possibly work. It denies that the publication process has any costs attached to it. It fails to acknowledge that publication involves not merely the peer review of papers but their improvement, by editors, throughout the publication process. It also fails to recognize that learned societies such as ours rely on journal sales to fund their running costs and other activities: in our case the website, LIBRAL, the Thirsk Prize, conferences and conference bursaries and the like. This is a moment of great danger for all humanities and social science journals, especially for those journals which continue to be managed by learned societies.

So I end my term as editor at a time of great anxiety for the future. It has been two decades of hard work (there has never been a day when I did not have some overdue *Review* business to do), but two decades of great fun. I have not enjoyed writing rejection letters (I have never decided whether short or long letters are the best way to break bad news), and copyediting is at best a grind. I shall retire both my copies of the *Oxford minidictionary of spelling* (on which I relied for correct hyphenation and without which an editor should never travel). I have enjoyed being the first to see new work, often improving it – editing is a *creative* activity despite what authors sometimes feel – and having a hand in bringing it before our community. Overall, it seems to have been time well spent. I shall go back to reading the *Review* when it comes through the letterbox, with its element of surprise restored.

R.W.H

³ Plan S has a website: <https://www.coalition-s.org/>. The Royal Historical Society has been especially active in opposing unfunded open access and its policy papers can be found on its website, www.royalhistsoc.org.