

Former *BJHS* editors: the questionnaire

Simon Schaffer

What was your best moment as *BJHS* editor? And worst?

The very warmest moment as *BJHS* editor was my encounter with Trish Hatton and Crosbie Smith in an exceptionally pleasant country pub somewhere in Kent in 2003 to discuss exactly what to do: once I'd realized how efficient and reliable was Trish, and how limited the powers vested in and duties demanded of the editor, the task seemed pleasingly straightforward. A darker passage was the realization during 2007-8 of the ghastly implications of the European Science Foundation's plan to establish a reference index for all humanities journals, in which each journal would be assigned a rank. Together with Robert Fox (from *Notes and Records of the Royal Society*) and Iwan Morus (from *History of Science*) we were able rapidly to organise an effective international campaign across the discipline against the proposal. Though that campaign was fairly successful, such initiatives as the Australian government's current Excellence for Research in Australia, which produces lists of ranked journals to direct its researchers, a scheme now far too often adopted elsewhere, show the need for continued activism against this threat to scholarly work and quality.

How do you think the *BJHS* compares to other history of science journals?

The number of journals in the field rose very rapidly between in the two decades before 2004. Many were oriented towards specific scientific disciplines and well defined periods as theme, others adopted a confessedly evangelical attitude towards a specific historiography. In comparison, *BJHS* will seem a journal of somewhat conservative format and rigorously reviewed content, with no evident limit on scope. Editors don't choose any articles but they do (or can) reject not a few. *BJHS* basks in the fact that it receives a healthy surplus of publishable material. The work that matters most includes writing that does not obey the format of the scholarly article: in the period of my editorship, a couple of special issues (Simon Naylor's 2005 collection on historical geographies of science and Richard Dunn's 2009 group of papers on instruments at Greenwich) were peculiarly effective. So, too, were some especially pungent essay reviews: by Jeff Hughes on the history of nuclear weapons (2004), Jamie Cohen-Cole on cybernetics (2008) and Yasmin Haskell on early modern

melancholy (2009). But of course that had nothing to do with me: massive respect to my book reviews editor Greg Radick.

Did you have any particular advice for your successor as *BJHS* editor?

The very title of *BJHS* has been a challenge: it was surprisingly often necessary to explain that this was not a journal for the history of British science, while the very term 'science' posed its own familiar disciplinary challenges. In terms of impact and international grasp. *BJHS* typically ranks rather highly in the field, and can help itself by ensuring it prints the best work from communities heretofore not well represented in conventional stories about the past of the sciences, though (as emphasized) such rankings are entirely invidious. Distribution, especially online, together with reliability and speed of editorial work, seem the key principles here: and this was almost all I risked passing on as advice to the current expert editorial team.

How do you see the future shape of history of science journal publishing?

Crucial for the editors is the fact that *BJHS* generates a very large proportion of the income of BSHS. A highly significant part of this surplus was generated by online subscription from institutions in the emerging economies. The Finch report on open access, accepted by the current government in July 2012, proposes that publishers receive their revenue from authors not readers; as of April 2013, so I understand, *BJHS* will only be able to publish material from work resourced by UK Research Councils if the journal complies with the Open Access Policy. That major funding change is an important part of the journal's future. So, presumably, is the complete disappearance of paper publishing, and new schemes for print-on-demand. This raises some interesting opportunities for the journal: the extinction of the traditional model of the journal issue; the importance of special issues; the greater ease of rapid discussion forums online around the published material; the incorporation of a wide range of AV material inside the journal's site. This discipline will be well placed to exploit or at least make sense of all these developments, since they are also the topic of our scholarly inquiry. But all this depends on the continuing survival of strong institutional support for historians of the sciences and their many colleagues. Current UK policies don't suggest this is certain or even probable.

Janet Browne

What was your best moment as *BJHS* editor? And worst?

There were many excellent moments. It was fun to visit Cambridge University Press in the days when printing presses were still in use; the special numbers, of which the Student issue, and the Cumulative Index, were both published in BSHS anniversary year 1997; working with wonderful, warm-hearted Book Review Editors; and regular contact with Wing Commander Bennett, whose dry sense of humour carried us through the Society's annual cycle and provided eagerly anticipated updates on storage problems relating to the Monograph series. The best moment for me personally, however, was Council's agreement that *BJHS* could, in future, have a salaried assistant. This came at a time when it was a real stretch to persuade Council that the journal could do with some help, long before the agreeable upturn in the Society's finances. I felt very strongly that this was a structural thing that needed to be done in order to recruit new editors after me. The introduction of our fabulous *BJHS* Assistant, Ms Trish Hatton, just after I stepped down, made the inner workings of *BJHS* into a much more professional enterprise. Any worst moments should probably be left undocumented. They usually came on Sunday afternoons.

What's your best dinner-table *BJHS* story?

Editors can't ever tell stories except to other editors.....

Did you have any particular advice for your successor as *BJHS* editor?

For sure. On leaving, I gave my successor a list of helpful hints that are now utterly obsolete and possibly were even then.

How do you see the future shape of history of science journal publishing?

The avalanche of titles makes the field extremely diverse and increasingly hard for purchasing libraries to categorize and justify. It might be time to start consolidating around a few key titles. Or maybe follow the route of PLOS (Public Library of Science) and go for a small stable of electronic journals, with print on demand.