

Being Editor

Author(s): Thomas R. Trautmann

Source: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Jan., 2008), pp. 21-25

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27563653>

Accessed: 16-05-2017 01:49 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://about.jstor.org/terms>



Cambridge University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to
Comparative Studies in Society and History

Being Editor

THOMAS R. TRAUTMANN

CSSH Editor 1997–2006, Editorial Committee 2006–present

Having brought my editorship to an end just before the *CSSH* fiftieth birthday—having, you might say, just stepped out of the maelstrom—it might be worthwhile to seize the occasion to analyze, in tranquility, what at the time was just too intense, too difficult but also too deeply satisfying an experience to put into words. Without a doubt, being editor of *CSSH* was the most gratifying job I ever had, but why? How to bottle the maelstrom?

The terms of the job were severe but strangely appealing.

In the first place, there is no pay at all, zero; and no relief from teaching or committee duties since *CSSH* is an independent entity and not the creature of my university or department, however supportive they have been in practice. All of us do unremunerated work, of course, and we do it because the object of our affection and labors is worthy and deserving of our efforts. So much is clear. But I think the satisfaction arises in the first place because there is no question whether the compensation is proportionate to the work or comparable to other editorships at other journals. Freed of all such considerations one does it because it is a good thing to do, for a journal one is proud to be a part of and that deserves one's best effort, full stop, end of story.

In the second place the workload is severe and unremitting. This, too, is an attraction (albeit an austere one) because it means the journal's reputation is strong. It is a matter of pride for us that *CSSH* gets a steady flow of submissions, most of them of a very high quality. The volume of submissions is far beyond the capacity of the journal to publish them all. The editor reads every one. Virtually every working day a manuscript arrives, and although there are lulls and bulges in the flow it does not stop. Becoming editor sometimes has a sorcerer's apprentice quality, provoking the panicky feeling of an inexorably rising tide. Eventually, of course, one gets into the stride of things, the terror subsides and the burden becomes manageable. But there is still the problem of rejecting many manuscripts, on the order of nine out of ten submissions, many of them very good, meriting publication and sure to get published elsewhere. I spent a considerable amount of my time drafting rejection letters that were sent out over the signature of the editorial assistant. I tried, following the good example of Ray Grew, to give useful feedback to authors on their articles, hoping to make the transaction beneficial if not pain-free.

Many people writing on India, knowing that it was my own field, sent submissions, and I felt obliged to steel myself and insure that the lineup was not overwhelmed by India articles. As a result I felt obliged to be sterner with the articles of persons I often knew and respected. If this effect is general (and I suppose it is), one of the pains of the editorship, then, is the turning down of the work of friends. I do not believe I lost many friends in the process, as most of them are understanding and forgiving people, but it is a perverse dynamic of the state of being editor that I had not anticipated, and seems to be an inescapable part of the job.

Rejections were painful for me, though they were not for our beloved founding editor Sylvia Thrupp, the creator of *CSSH*, who was made of sterner stuff. It is a favorite story we tell about her, that a colleague of ours put a submission in her mailbox by 9:00 A.M. and got it back, rejected, before noon. When he said to Sylvia that she could at least have kept it overnight she replied to the effect that the article, unlike a fine wine, would not improve with age. The colleague in question is now president of a university, evidence that being rejected by *CSSH* is not fatal.

There are many aspects of the process of selection that make it hard work for the editor but also inviting. The single most salient structural feature of the entire operation is that *CSSH* has no membership organization whose members may make demands upon it. Its organization is rudimentary. It is owned by a non-profit corporation called, slightly redundantly, the Society for the Comparative Study of Society and History, whose officers are a handful of professors, most of them at the University of Michigan. It has an Editorial Committee to advise and assist the editor, but it is not an editorial collective making collective decisions. Some articles are rejected at once because they are not appropriate for *CSSH* or, in a few cases, because they are not good enough to merit review. On the great bulk of submitted articles the editor seeks the opinions of experts. The unremunerated evaluations of those in a position to judge is another invaluable asset of *CSSH*, but these, too, the editor considers merely advisory, or this editor did at any rate, and I felt free to reject advice I did not find persuasive. In the end, the sole decider is the editor, in spite of the conventional language of collective decision in which it had become our custom to couch these things. Thus the absence of a membership feeling it owns the journal, and the absence of a structure of collective decision-making with its tendency to pull to the middle, together with the rigorous pursuit of informed advice, leaves the editor free to exercise personal judgment and taste to a degree that is not found in journals where other conditions prevail. This gives the editor the full weight of responsibility, as well as the full freedom to act.

The editor's freedom in the exercise of judgment and taste is a valuable thing for *CSSH*. We can be open to every tendency and the captive of none. We can take risks on a bold article that, at another journal, may fall subject to the veto

power of one or two in an editorial collective. We can accept articles that are transgressive. There is a real possibility that instituted procedures meant to secure fairness and balance will secure instead a narrowing of the spectrum, a danger *CSSH* does not face.

The editor is also free, of course, to make mistakes, and I left office aware of at least a few of them, on both sides of the ledger. One article I rejected went on to win a prize when it was published in another journal, and its author was kind enough to let me know about it. A few articles did not seem quite so stunning when I came to compose the lineup for the next issue as they had when I accepted them. Mistakes of evaluation are not dire for *CSSH* but they affect authors. Submitters need to know that editors are fallible and not to take their decisions to heart.

I imagine our founder, an historian of medieval England, creating *CSSH* in order to open herself and her own field to fresh ideas from conversations with people in the social sciences, especially anthropology and sociology; expanding her own mental world by creating through the journal an ongoing conversation among the adjacent disciplines in which she could benefit herself while benefiting others. As someone specializing in the history (and anthropology) of ancient India (and a few other things) and excessively given to the solitary mode of production, being editor was strongly therapeutic for me in just this way. As editor I got a vigorous workout reading in other fields for bright ideas from completely unexpected sources that may have applications in mine, and that is the real pleasure of the thing. In this way being editor is simply a more intense version of being a *CSSH* reader, with a correspondingly more concentrated payoff but one that is of the same kind.

Being a historian of the ancient world I have always hoped that articles on ancient and medieval times could be a regular part of the bouquet we offer readers every three months. Some of the articles of which I am most fond are of this kind, and I am glad to have been able to stimulate a flow of them by direct appeal to readers in the editorial foreword. But I have to say I was only partially successful in this. It continues to concern me that the ancient and medieval worlds are losing their power for us, not as specialized fields of history of interest in themselves, but as resources for the deep history of our times.

Making the bouquet for the next issue is very like arranging flowers, choosing several from among the accepted articles in hand and forming unexpected and unplanned combinations of pieces that seem to speak to one another even though they arrived as strangers to one another. We ask authors to supply abstracts, but these are only used for the early stages of the process, when we are seeking reviewers. The truth of the matter is that authors invariably write poor abstracts of their own articles, and I have found it a better practice to introduce articles briefly in my own words, in the editorial foreword. It is pleasing to see other journals borrowing our style in these matters.

One of the benefits of being editor is that it makes one a better submitter of articles to journals. Before I became editor I often felt that it is all right to submit an article one knows to be in need of further work, since reviewers will in any case suggest yet further work. Being editor I came to see that the more polished the article when it is submitted the higher is the quality of the comments from reviewers. This is because an article in rough shape will offer too many imperfections for reviewers to comment on, and commentary will be scattered across a larger surface rather than focusing on the substance of the argument. I now firmly believe that one should make the article as good as one can before submitting, in order to get back the most helpful suggestions from reviewers.

Finally, being editor bears the added pleasure of being in the company of the greats, Sylvia Thrupp, our founder, Raymond Grew, my good friend and mentor, and their friend Erik Wolf, whose name appeared on the masthead with Sylvia and Ray for several years; also Diane Owen Hughes, my associate editor, friend, and colleague, David Akin, my managing editor and friend, and editorial assistants and editorial committee members over the years. It is gratifying to travel to other countries and see in the reading rooms of university and departmental libraries the ineffable green of the *CSSH* cover, a color immediately identifiable because it is found nowhere else in nature, and to think, I made that, with help from my friends.

Being called by that seductive green cover from among the other journals on a reading-room table, picking it up and finding new and interesting things in it that I was not looking for and might not have read if they had not come to hand quite literally and concretely—this is the model I had in mind when composing lineups and groupings of articles I hoped would lure readers like me from one article to another. Alas, it is a model that departs further and further from reality as searching and browsing become electronic activities and reading rooms become virtual. The ways *CSSH* and all academic journals are being read these days is changing, and the ways we make *CSSH* have to be responsive. One striking change is very welcome to me. The hard work of making five-year indexes involved, in my experience, devising new and relevant subject categories, replacing the categories of the previous five-year index that had become obsolete, with the result that subject categories did not remain uniform from one index to the next. Electronic search routines put the category-making power in the hands of each user, rather than freezing them in print as relics of a moment, and brought an end to the five-year index, whose passing I do not mourn. This is entirely to the good. Speaking generally, there is every reason to hope that the effects of the changing technologies will be benign. The one I most care about is the continuing ability to find wonderful articles one is not looking for.

Now that I have talked Andrew Shryock into being editor, now that his acceptance of the editorship has secured for *CSSH* the advantages of his

youth, his vigor, his smarts and his wide-ranging intellectual sympathies, I know that the journal I love will complete its fiftieth year in good shape and enter its second half-century with every prospect of continued good health and long life. *CSSH* readers, who are our one and only constituency, our invisible audience and our true friends, will be the beneficiaries.