

# “I GET BY WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS ... ”: AN EDITOR’S RETROSPECTIVE

BY

STEVEN G. MEDEMA 

In the spring of 1998, I received a phone call from Brad Bateman, informing me that Donald Walker, the *Journal of the History of Economic Thought’s* (*JHET*) editor since 1990, would be stepping down at the end of June and asking if I would consider tossing my hat into the ring for the editorship. I was thirty-five years old at the time and, though ten years post-PhD, considered myself very much a junior scholar in the field. Of course, those were the days when giants walked the earth. My first UK History of Economic Thought (HET) Conference, which took place at the University of Bath and which I attended only months after being handed the editorship of *JHET*, included luminaries such as Mark Blaug, Bernard Corry, Andrew Skinner, Sam Hollander, Walter Eltis, Donald Winch, Bob Coats, and Tony Brewer—all but Sam sadly no longer with us—along with the likes of David Collard, Roger Backhouse, Antoin Murphy, Terry Peach, and Ian Steedman. Richard van den Berg and I were veritable children allowed to play in the room with the adults.

Why had I run off to the UK conference less than three months after being named editor?<sup>1</sup> The answer is quite simple. In 1998 the journal transitioned from being essentially self-published to having a commercial publisher, Carfax—moving from two to four issues per year in the process. This had depleted the stock of accepted papers to the point where, in July 1998, I was shocked to discover that I had inherited from my predecessor a queue consisting of a single article.<sup>2</sup> In a matter of a few months I would have to send my first issue, March 1999, to press, and I had one article to work with.<sup>3</sup> This made the question of how to fill the journal’s pages something on the order of

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Steven G. Medema: Department of Economics and Center for the History of Political Economy, Duke University. Email: [sgm37@duke.edu](mailto:sgm37@duke.edu)

<sup>1</sup> I was named the new editor of *JHET*, for a five-year term, at the June 1998 meeting of the society’s executive committee. As that term was coming to a close, the executive committee asked whether I would be willing to serve a second term, and I agreed to do so. The decision was also taken at that time to limit an editor’s tenure to two five-year terms. Medema (1999) provides some insight into my views of the editorial process and my vision for the journal. Bateman (2008) offers an early retrospective view of my editorship in an essay that somehow was prepared without my knowing about it until the issue was going to press.

<sup>2</sup> Carfax was eventually absorbed by Routledge, which was in turn absorbed by Taylor & Francis.

<sup>3</sup> This was long before the age of web-based journal management systems and even electronic (PDF) email submissions. Submissions came in hard copy form and by mail, and this reliance on both paper and post

a three-alarm fire. It was clear to me that I needed to get out there into the field and make *JHET* a visible presence, something it was not at the time, in the hope that more and better (but *more* was the operative concern at the moment) papers would flow into the journal. And so off I went.

Of course, Medema running off to Bath did not resolve the immediate problem of filling the pages for the March 1999 issue. Fortunately, I was able to convince Don Walker to contribute a piece, “The Relevance for Present Economic Theory of Economic Theory Written in the Past,” to honor his service to the journal and the History of Economics Society (HES). A couple of additional papers emerged from the refereeing process with positive reviews during the late summer months, but I remained short at least one article for filling the March issue, which was due to go to press in late October. It was then that David Levy stepped into the breach to bail me out, offering me a paper that had just been rejected by the *Journal of Political Economy* (*JPE*) and even the several *JPE* referee reports on the paper if I needed them to assist me in making a decision. Desperate times call for desperate measures, so I readily agreed to give the paper and the reports a look. Satisfied by what I saw, I accepted the paper, and my first issue of *JHET* was complete only days ahead of the deadline.

Though the immediate crisis had been averted, there remained the long-run problem of how to fill the journal’s pages four times per year. This time it was David Colander, then the HES president, who came to the rescue. David suggested at the December 1998 meeting of the executive committee that the society end its contract with Routledge to produce a volume of papers from each HES conference, *Perspectives on the History of Economic Thought*, and instead dedicate one issue of *JHET* each year to papers from the conference.<sup>4</sup> The executive committee readily agreed with this idea and, effective with the 2000 volume, the June issue was given over to a selection of papers from the previous year’s HES conference, along with the associated HES Presidential Address.<sup>5</sup> This gift did not come without cost; the short timelines put a tremendous strain on the editorial process, particularly given that we were not willing to skimp on the refereeing. But with the help of dedicated referees and timely revising, we were able to bring it off. In fact, the results were astounding. We received a significant infusion of good papers from the conference, each year’s crop yielding more than enough accepted articles to fill a single issue. And because we were not skimping on the refereeing, it was no problem to hold over some papers for later issues of the journal. Colander’s stroke of genius got us through during a time when we were trying to grow the journal’s reputation and footprint, and so the supply of high-quality submissions. By 2005 the conventional submission process was yielding plenty of good stuff and there was no longer a need for an issue dedicated to papers from the conference—much to the delight of both the editor and the managing editor.

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meant that the manuscripts for each issue had to be sent off to the publisher five months ahead of the publication date.

<sup>4</sup> *Perspectives* was published from 1989 to 2000, the publication date lagging the conference date by two years. Each volume was edited by the corresponding HES conference organizer, with two volumes per year being published from 1989 to 1992. The first eleven volumes were published by Edward Elgar and the last four by Routledge. A list of titles from the series can be found in the [online appendix](#) to this article.

<sup>5</sup> Medema and Caldwell (2000) provides a discussion of how the conference issue was envisioned to operate.

Perhaps my most important qualification for the editorship was having been a student, co-author, co-editor, and friend of the redoubtable Warren Samuels. One obvious benefit of this was having been around the editorial process, for both books and journals, since I was a graduate student. But the more important one was that Warren's fabulous eclecticism seems to have rubbed off on me. My aspirational motto for the journal was, "We publish cool stuff." I certainly had no objection to publishing the 257th paper on Adam Smith's theory of value, but topics and historiographic methods that were off the field's traditional path were something I was particularly keen to see in the journal's pages. And authors responded, as evidenced by articles such as Levy's "How the Dismal Science Got Its Name" (2001), Robert Leonard's "Imagined Reminiscence by Oskar Morgenstern about Equilibrium and Mathematics in the 1920s" (2004), Roy Weintraub's "Economic Science Wars" (2007), and Craufurd Goodwin's "Economic Man in the Garden of Eden" (2000)—the last of these including Bloomsbury renderings of Adam and Eve in their "pre-fall" splendor. So, too, with work on the history of modern economics, an area in its infancy when I was named editor and which I hope that *JHET* had some role in promoting.

It is useful for an editor to know what he doesn't know and, just as important, to understand what needs to be done to mitigate the damage from that. In my own case, I have long been known to know nothing about macroeconomics and to doze off when the subject veers off into methodology and the history thereof. As these were topics very much in play in the history of economics literature, it was apparent to me that I needed help, and I got it when Roger Backhouse and Wade Hands accepted my invitation (read: plea) to serve as associate editors of the journal. Roger and Wade were endless sources of wise counsel on papers and referees in particular, but they were also a terrific safety net for a young editor trying to find his way. The same can be said for Don Walker, who cheerfully responded to my numerous emails requesting information about this or that, as well as for the members of the editorial board, whose advice, encouragement, and work on behalf of the journal proved to be so important as we attempted to raise its profile.

One of the major benefits of being a journal editor is that it forces one to read an enormous number of papers that one otherwise would not. In short, you learn *a lot*. And, for a young historian of economics, this was a particularly good thing, one that I was very conscious of when I decided to apply for the position. This also helped motivate my decision to handle the book reviews commissioning myself, something I did during the entirety of my ten years as editor.<sup>6</sup> Those were the good ol' days, when publishers would simply send copies of new books in the field to the relevant journals, seeking a review.<sup>7</sup> This meant that a healthy number of these books would show up in my mailbox, helping me to stay abreast of that important part of the literature. More importantly, however, I have always considered book reviews an undervalued scholarly genre—this, too, a legacy of Warren's influence on me—despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that I am not myself a very good writer of such reviews. I wanted to expand this aspect of the

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Trescott had served as book reviews editor throughout Don Walker's tenure as *JHET* editor and responded very gracefully when I nervously informed him that I would be handling the reviews myself.

<sup>7</sup> Sadly, most publishers no longer do this. Some send out email announcements of new books, but it is largely on review editors to keep tabs on what is being published and to request review copies of books for which reviews have been commissioned.

journal's publishing program with review essays, multiple reviews of certain books, and broader historiographic coverage. And, as with the selection of referees, matching books with reviewers was an interesting challenge, an aspect of the job that I very much enjoyed. The sad part, of course, was watching all of those wonderful books go back out in the mail to the reviewers. That there was no Amazon Prime in those days probably saved me a good deal of money, given my propensity to impulse-buy books.

The final piece of the editorial puzzle was arguably the most important. Not long after being named editor, I approached Craufurd Goodwin, then editor of *HOPE*, to say that I needed a first-rate managing editor to do for *JHET* what his managing editors were doing for *HOPE*. That said, I had little clue exactly what that was, save for experiencing it from the author's end and knowing it was good. So, Craufurd and Paul Dudenhefer, who had recently taken over as *HOPE*'s managing editor, helped me put together a job description and, with financial support provided by my then academic home, the University of Colorado Denver, I hired Carol Bauer to be the journal's first managing editor, effective at the start of January 1999. For ten years, Carol worked diligently with manuscripts, authors, and publishers to make every paper and every issue shine, a challenge only compounded by two major publisher-*cum*-house-style transitions along the way against which she had to copyedit and do preliminary layout. Carol also handled much of the editorial correspondence, which in the early days in particular was predominantly by post and fax, and managed to put up with me. One of the things about *JHET* circa 1999 to 2008 of which I am most proud is that the journal always looked terrific, and I received innumerable comments to that effect during my years as editor. The reason for this can be described in one word: Carol. It is the content of an article that is the fundamental determinant of its quality, but it is all too easy for quality content to get lost in difficult prose—and all the more so when English is not the author's first language. The role Carol played in the evolution of *JHET* into a top-flight journal cannot be underestimated.

The move from an essentially self-published journal to the use of a commercial publisher in 1998 paid dividends for the editor, the journal, and the society. Don Walker was effectively the editorial, production, and shipping departments for the journal prior to the arrangement with Carfax. Such was his dedication to the journal that he would drive several hours to deliver the copyedited manuscripts for each issue to the printer and repeat the trip to pick up the printed copies of the journal after they had rolled off the presses. The Carfax arrangement also expanded the journal's reach on the libraries front and, with the growth of the World Wide Web, its electronic footprint, as well as providing a bit of financing to support the journal and the society. But by the mid-2000s and with *JHET*'s reputation growing, there was a sense that we could do better, so to speak. The interests of academic journals, their editors, and scholarly societies are not always neatly aligned with those of commercial publishers, and we were also of the mind that the journal's growing influence might pave the way to a better financial deal for the HES. So, when the Carfax/Routledge/Taylor & Francis contract was winding down, the society decided to explore its options. A committee made up of Brad Bateman, Wade Hands, Neil Niman, and myself decided to research the possibilities and solicit proposals from a variety of academic and commercial presses. It was gratifying to see a number of prominent publishers compete for the journal and, in the end, Cambridge University Press (CUP) was selected to be our partner. And so began a marriage that, from the start, paid great dividends for the HES. We had the benefits of CUP's excellent journals team, led by Patrick McCartan, cross-pollination with CUP's Historical Perspectives on

Modern Economics book series, then edited by Craufurd Goodwin,<sup>8</sup> and a fabulous financial arrangement that poured what for us was an astounding amount of money into the society's coffers—an amount many times what we were receiving under the old publishing agreement.

One consequence of the move to CUP was that *JHET* received a striking new cover, in the design of which I was asked to have a small hand. I selected the deep blue as the banner and spine color—red, green, and black being the other options, as I recall—but the question then arose of how to fill the blank spaces above and below the banner. I suggested that it might be nice to insert images from a couple of classic works in the field, and the folks at CUP readily agreed that this would be most appropriate, given the subject matter. In the end, I chose the beginning of chapter one of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* for the space above the banner and a lengthy footnote from Alfred Marshall's *Principles*, featuring an early demand–supply diagram, to appear below the banner. I photographed these pages from my own copies of the books, one of the artifacts of which is that my annotation of the Smith passage—a hand-drawn star I use to identify bits that I read out to the students in my class—has appeared on the *JHET* cover ever since. Though I told CUP at the time that they might wish to airbrush my scribble out of the image, they thought it right and good to keep it in. And, in retrospect, I am glad that they did, as it brings a smile to my face, along with a flood of good memories, whenever I notice it on the cover of the journal.

Though the December 2008 issue of *JHET* was the final one published under my editorship, the hand-off to my successors, Marcel Boumans and Evelyn Forget, began on July 1 of that year. Having inherited only a single article a decade earlier, it gave me great pleasure to be able to hand over to them a queue containing multiple issues' worth of accepted papers. The past decade had seen *JHET* evolve into a journal to which scholars from around the world would send their best stuff, and into a major asset, financially and otherwise, for the HES. And, because of the excellent work of Marcel, Evelyn, Steve Meardon, Pedro Duarte, and Jimena Hurtado, its profile has only increased since that time. The journal has come a very long way since 1979, when Karen Vaughn (1979 to 1983), whose lovely retrospective appears in this symposium, brought our community the first issue of the *HES Bulletin*. My guess is that she, Bill Thweatt (1984 to 1989), and even Don Walker (1990 to 1998) could not envision where we would be some forty-five years later.

Let me end this essay where I began it: on the road. Thanks to the unfailing support of the HES executive committee and University of Colorado Denver, I had a reasonable travel budget and so tried to participate in as many history of economics-related conferences and workshops as I could during my time as editor, racking up a load of frequent flier miles in the process. Though I never once solicited a paper for the journal, it was enough just to show the flag, so to speak. Papers began to flow in, and good ones. It did not have to be that way. Good people sent us good papers, which they could easily have elected to send elsewhere. At the time that I was named editor, the ranking of history of economics journals was *HOPE* and then everything else in a very, very distant second place. But people were interested in seeing *JHET* become an excellent journal, a

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<sup>8</sup> The Historical Perspectives on Modern Economics series is now edited by Harro Maas, and the friendly competition of editing *JHET* alongside Craufurd's *HOPE* has been replaced by editing Oxford University Press's Oxford Studies in the History of Economics alongside Harro's CUP series.

true credit to the HES and the broader history of economics community, and with helping me to succeed as a fledgling editor. For this, I will always be immensely grateful, and the society should be as well.

The extensive travels associated with my tenure as editor brought another and, for me at least, far more important benefit: a host of new friendships and acquaintances, the pleasures associated with which have been one of the highlights of my career. We are part of a remarkable community. We are people interested in the history of economics for a set of very different reasons. Our individual interests span a goodly chunk of recorded human history, from the Ancient Greeks to some of the most recent developments in our field. Some of us care about individuals; others, about ideas, tools, or methods. Still others focus their attention on the development of the “discipline” or “profession,” and the roles that economists play beyond the ivory tower. The history of economics field is fabulously rich and diverse, its scholarship profiting from the variety of historiographic perspectives brought to bear on our subjects. Perhaps the foremost benefit of serving as a journal editor in our field is that one gets ample exposure to all of this, and to the people who do it.

## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1053837223000470>.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests exist.

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