



COMMENT

‘Pity the poor independent scholar!': The Lament of a Latecomer Historian

John Sanders

Independent Scholar, Manchester, UK

Corresponding author: John Sanders; Email: mjpdk1@gmail.com

(Received 15 May 2024; revised 3 June 2024; accepted 10 June 2024)

Abstract

This commentary article explores some of the problems encountered by independent scholars seeking to get their work published in peer-reviewed journals and in particular the difficulties they face in accessing online resources. Though often hidden, these issues are nevertheless very real for aspiring historians and those who have returned late to the historical fold. The article acknowledges the efforts of a number of journals to encourage different voices, but highlights how the limitations of current licensing and Open Access arrangements hinders this ambition.

Keywords: independent scholar; online resources; open access; historical journals

The tributes that poured in after the death of Hilary Mantel in 2023 were unanimous in recognising her achievements as a historian as much as a crafter of elegant prose, which according to James Naughtie ‘made history sing’. In the *Independent*’s words: ‘She understood the nuances of history, power and politics better than many an academic historian.’ For Diarmaid MacCulloch, emeritus professor at the University of Oxford, ‘she changed the way we think about history’ and ‘explored the past for herself with a historian’s eye and a storyteller’s sensibility’.¹ Another esteemed writer of historical fiction, Bernard Cornwell, modestly categorises himself as ‘a storyteller’ rather than ‘a historian’. However, his novels are firmly underpinned by a grasp of the historical detail and nuance of the different eras

¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 23 Sept. 2022; <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/hilary-mantel-death-tribute-b2174010.html> (accessed 29 May 2023); <https://www.historyextra.com/period/21st-century/hilary-mantel-remembered-legacy/> (accessed 29 May 2023).

in which they are set.² Tellingly, in neither case, was ‘historian’ their day-job or the academy their occupational base.

A number of earlier scholars whose work has shaped mainstream historical discourse similarly boasted non-specialist or non-affiliated backgrounds. Before the Robbins expansion of higher education in the early 1960s, such career paths were commonplace. E. P. Thompson was still working as an adult educator at the time he first published *The Making of the English Working Class*. J. F. C. Harrison, eminent historian of Owenism, Chartism and working-class educative endeavours, likewise hailed from an extramural background. Eric Midwinter’s early career combined being an inspirational visionary of (local authority) educational practice, a social policy analyst and the author of historical studies of social administration and law and order in early Victorian England. He later became a co-founder of the U3A.³ Such polymathic trajectories were not uncommon. Countless others went on to pursue valuable careers outside the formal confines of academia, while retaining their enthusiasm for history and their ability to produce thoroughly researched contributions to its canon.

Despite the proliferation of opportunities opened up by the inexorable expansion of higher education, this tradition has persisted in subsequent years. A quick perusal of the potted biographies of contributors to collections of historical essays in fields such as labour history reveal just how many are school teachers, adult educators, civil servants, librarians, trade union officials or activists. As Katrina Navickas noted in 2011, many of the new histories of protest and collective action are predicated on regional or local studies.⁴ These continue to flourish under the auspices of local heritage organisations, sustained through the enthusiasms of part-time researchers, who can afford to ignore the methodological controversies and the REF-orientated, paper-producing engines that, in part, drive the political economy of academia.⁵

Such scholars form just part of an army of analogue antiquarians, family history enthusiasts, digital detectorists, ‘amateur’ historians and re-enactors, who contribute so much to the store of historical knowledge and energy. The role of the non-affiliated specialist is often unrecognised or underrated. Yet, without the skill and enthusiasm of people such as Philippa Langley of the Richard III Society, the former monarch would still be liable for unpaid parking fines in Leicester.⁶

In my own field, it is hard not to be struck by the quality, variety and significance of historical work that has been produced outside the academic

² <https://www.thebookseller.com/author-interviews/bernard-cornwell--im-often-asked-if-i-am-a-historian-and-i-say-no-i-am-a-storyteller-thats-my-job> (accessed 29 May 2023).

³ Jeremy Hardie, *Variety is the Spice of Life: The Worlds of Eric Midwinter* (2023). Midwinter is also a cricket historian and an expert on British comedy.

⁴ Katrina Navickas, ‘What happened to Class? New Histories of Labour and Collective Action in Britain’, *Social History*, 36 (2011), 197.

⁵ John P. O’Regan and John Gray, ‘The Bureaucratic Distortion of Academic Work: A Transdisciplinary Analysis of the UK Research Excellence Framework in the Age of Neoliberalism’, *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 18 (2018), 533–48.

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/dec/08/philippa-langley-richard-third-car-park> (accessed 29 May 2023).

mainstream. For example, Alan Brooke's *Underground Histories* website provides a wealth of local knowledge and insights into the economic, political and social history of the Huddersfield area. Mark Crail's *Chartist Ancestors* website has similarly become a key reference point for students of Chartism.⁷ There are plenty of other producers of historical research, writing and resources, generated beyond the 'ivory towers', whose work deserves to be celebrated.

It is important to acknowledge at this point that I have skin in this particular game. One of the unintended consequences of Covid pandemic and the ensuing lockdown was the opportunity to activate a long-held intention to revisit some of the historical research and writing that I did in the late 1970s and early 1980s, before and during the arrival of children and the need to get a 'proper job'! With some initial encouragement from Keith Laybourn and Matthew Roberts at the Society for the Study of Labour History, this re-engagement has so far borne fruit in the shape of four academic articles published in a variety of journals and an overarching book.⁸

This article reflects on some of the general issues raised by my experience as an independent scholar returning to the academic domain. It is simultaneously a plea for the contribution of non-affiliated researchers to be better recognised and a call for their endeavours to be facilitated by the removal of unnecessary barriers.

These obstacles come in different shapes and sizes. Some are scarcely visible, but they are very real nevertheless. The first are the barriers to accessing sources and resources. Initially these impediments do not appear too onerous or widespread. Public libraries and local authority archives services are welcoming and open to all. A sizeable chunk of the ground floor of Manchester Central Library, for example, is devoted to local studies. It provides access to specialist advice courtesy of the Manchester and Lancashire Family History Society and dedicated computers with free access to all the key family history websites including the coveted 1921 census. The National Archives in Kew proudly proclaims that it 'is now open to everyone'. Anyone can apply for a reader's ticket. The resources of the British Library are similarly available to all.⁹

However, as we approach the realm of higher education things get trickier. The problem is not so much in relation to the stewardship of repositories of

⁷ <https://undergroundhistories.wordpress.com/> (accessed 29 May 2023); <https://www.chartistancestors.co.uk/> (accessed 29 May 2023).

⁸ John Sanders, 'The Voice of the "Shoeless, Shirtless and Shameless": Community Radicalism in the West Riding, 1829 to 1839', *Northern History*, 58 (2021), 259–81; John Sanders, 'John Douthwaite and "John Powlett": Trades' Unionism and Conflict in Early 1830s Yorkshire', *Labour History Review*, 86 (2022), 8–17; John Sanders, 'Out of Obscurity: Local Leadership and Cultural Wealth in the Radical Communities of the West Riding Textile District, 1825–40', *History Workshop Journal*, 94 (2022), 1–23; John Sanders, 'Turncoats and Traitors, Rogues and Renegades: Reviewing Labour's Lost Leaders in Reform Era Yorkshire', *Social History*, 48 (2023), 426–51; John Sanders, *Workers of Their Own Emancipation: Working-Class Leadership and Organisation in the West Riding Textile District, 1829–1839* (2024).

⁹ <https://mlfhs.uk/research/getting-help/helpdesk> (accessed 29 May 2023); <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/> (accessed 29 May 2023); <https://www.bl.uk/help/how-to-get-a-reader-pass> (accessed 29 May 2023).

precious primary sources. Many university-held special collections are available to all (in person or online) via simple booking procedures, or can be accessed via the purchase of a membership.¹⁰ University stores of traditional secondary sources, literally stacks of books and journals, can also normally be accessed by 'readers', visiting in person and paying an annual membership fee. Such arrangements often include useful, if limited, borrowing rights.

Remote access, in contrast, is more problematic. This issue was particularly highlighted during the pandemic when restrictions applied to walk-in access, and in-person research was impossible. But the pre-existing position has remained fundamentally unchanged post-Covid: universities' ever-expanding store of e-resources (e-books, e-journals, digitalised theses, databases, images and illustrations) is basically not available to the independent scholar. Visitor access to these items is often restricted 'due to licensing restrictions' and requires personal attendance at limited walk-in facilities. The use of these precious resources, increasingly important now that many journals and some books are online only, is generally restricted to current students and staff. Even alumni, whose donations to support current students or future research are regularly solicited, are not included in the privileged recipients of online rights. For example, at the university where I did my PhD four decades ago, I enjoy fairly generous borrowing rights, but am not allowed to access the library's catalogue or digital resources online. Some of the latter are available to 'external readers', but only on-site via two very busy terminals.

Such exclusion perhaps mattered less a couple of generations ago when public libraries were in their pomp and purchased academic texts as well as general interest books. But decades of local government cuts and the undermining of the municipal infrastructure have closed off this route. Many of the secondary sources that underpin any original research are only now available online and in one location: university libraries. However, these have increasingly become sites of e-exclusion. The privatisation of knowledge, like that of public space, is often incremental and obscured behind a shiny new façade. If, as the *Poor Man's Guardian* proclaimed in the 1830s, 'knowledge is power', it is increasingly being hoarded by the already knowledge-rich.¹¹

This barrier to scholarly access is hidden in plain sight and is seemingly accepted by all parties, including institutions that rely heavily on public funds and are professedly at the heart of their communities. Indeed, many boast extensive public engagement strategies and have invested heavily in the public domain in the last twenty years, showcasing their museums, art galleries and cultural resources. My own alma mater has not one but two professors of public history and provides an extensive programme of engaging public lectures. Its celebrated origin story, embedded in its logo, links it to the foundation of the local Mechanics' Institute ('Est. 1824') ostensibly created for the very sorts of people – workers, clerks, part-time students – in modern parlance

¹⁰ <https://forms.library.manchester.ac.uk/public/form/5ca60337f85e57c3bbc9e522> (accessed 29 May 2023); <https://www.london.ac.uk/senate-house-library/membership/members-public> (accessed 29 May 2023).

¹¹ <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/poor-mans-guardian> (accessed 29 May 2023).

lifelong learners, who are effectively now barred by licensing agreements from using its e-resources. The Open University, for which I worked part-time for over thirty years, similarly does not allow former students or staff to access its online library facilities. Jennie Lee would be turning over in her grave.

These institutions are not isolated outliers. Similar restrictions apply throughout the sector. At the same time that most British universities proclaim their credentials as inclusive institutions with strong commitments to access and widening participation, a key element of their bountiful intellectual store is subject to rationing. As in other elements in our polity, the balance between public good and private gain is out of kilter. The outcomes of academic research funded directly or indirectly out of the public purse and conducted mainly by people employed by publicly funded HEIs are appropriated by publishing houses and other content providers and then sold back to the sector's libraries via licensing agreements, to the exclusion of the very people whose taxes have in part funded it. Or am I missing something?

So, in practice, the independent scholar is often forced to beg favours from fellow part-time historians, 'borrow' a login from a sympathetic insider and steal a march by maximising opportunities for 'free' online material. Non-tenured researchers quickly come to appreciate the joys of JSTOR, and to celebrate the authors and their institutions who have paid to allow their scholarly products to be 'Open Access' (OA). But even here, there is an ironical sting in the tail, since the benefits of OA cannot later be enjoyed fully by 'independents' due the consequent financial burdens. Without access to institutional funding to bear the substantial charges involved, their eventual work is less likely to be published OA, with all the implications that this entails for the visibility of their research and for future job prospects, if they aspire to an academic career.

In general, then, the scholarly existence of non-affiliated historians is always conditional and precarious, and often second-class. They are frequently obliged to proceed (to appropriate Jill Liddington and Jill Norris's phrase) with 'one hand tied behind [them]', without full access to the paraphernalia of academic scaffolding to support their work.¹² Significantly, the first 'common reason' that the Historical Association's *History* journal's author guidelines cite for rejection of an article is that 'the original research has not been properly related to recent scholarship in the field'.¹³ Access to secondary resources, particularly those available only online, increasingly matters in relation to placement. For even when the independent scholar has overcome these access restrictions, their problems are not over. The trials of placement and publication await.

Not all independent researchers wish to 'go the academic route' and seek to publish their work in a peer-reviewed journal. Other avenues are available: whether through local history or heritage organisations, more generalist publications, or self-publishing online or in print. For those who do seek to have their work considered for publication in an academic journal, however, the

¹² Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us: The Rise of the Women's Suffrage Movement* (1978).

¹³ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/page/journal/1468229x/homepage/forauthors.html> (accessed 29 May 2023).

prospect can be daunting. Processes that may seem normal, rational and sensible to insiders can sometimes feel off-putting and occasionally a bit bizarre to newcomers and outsiders.

Before addressing some of the possible problems posed by the current publication practices it is important to acknowledge the many positives. I have nothing but praise for the editors and technical staff of the various journals that I have dealt with as an independent scholar. They have been universally supportive, professional and thorough. Similarly, the double-blind peer-review system worked well. The feedback from referees was consistently thoughtful and insightful, rigorous and fair. Publication would also have not been possible without the support and openness of fellow independent, non-affiliated scholars, who have been, without exception, supportive and generous in sharing their time and knowledge. Getting to the submission stage, however, is far from straightforward.

First of all, find a suitable journal. Not an easy task given the proliferation of specialist titles and academic interest groups during the last decades. It is necessary to understand the different remits and target audiences of the *Labour History Review* as opposed to *Labour History: A Journal of Labour and Social History*; and to appreciate that *Social History* and the *Journal of Social History* are distinct publications. In the end the temptation is to go with what you know or remember from previous flirtations with the academy or to seek the advice of ‘friends in the trade’. But what if you are completely new to this process?

Journals’ mission statements or ‘Author Guidelines’ can provide valuable insights, and sometimes unwitting testimony as to their underpinning cultural assumptions. One eminent journal, for example, claims that ‘The best contemporary scholarship is represented’ in its pages. But how does it know: since it seemingly only encourages contributions from ‘early career scholars making a distinguished debut’ and ‘historians of established reputation’?¹⁴

In contrast other journals are actively seeking to encourage new voices and wider representation in their contributors. For example, a similarly esteemed publication actively solicits ‘submissions from younger scholars and seeks to engage constructively and positively with new authors’ and to broaden its range of article formats and subject areas.¹⁵ Another aims to host a ‘range of accessible research-driven features written by academic researchers from all stages of career and study, archivists, and practitioners’.¹⁶ Other titles, such as the *History Workshop Journal*, have always had a tradition of history from the bottom up.

Most journals, whatever their origins, now profess open and egalitarian principles. However, their practices, while not deliberately designed to be off-putting or restrictive, are not always totally supportive of such ambitions. This can be illustrated by looking at submission processes: for having found

¹⁴ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/historical-journal/information/about-this-journal> (accessed 29 May 2023).

¹⁵ <https://royalhistsoc.org/publications/transactions/> (accessed 29 May 2023).

¹⁶ <https://historyjournal.org.uk/about/> (accessed 29 May 2023).

a possible home for a proposed piece, it is then necessary to negotiate the particular (some might even say peculiar) requirements of the selected journal. These might include: word length (which often varies by several thousand words between similar journals), citation styles (footnotes or endnotes), formatting conventions (subheadings or no subheadings, indented paragraphs for all but the opening paragraph of a section) and referencing practices (which of the myriad of possible systems the journal has chosen to use).

The comprehensive style guides that enshrine these minute variations can be invaluable, but they can equally be daunting. Texts that clarify the use of en-dashes rather than hyphens (not forgetting the role of em-dashes), are illuminating, but also serve to emphasise to an academic newcomer that the (written) past is indeed a foreign country. One style guide, for example, advises that roman type should be used:

for the following abbreviations: cf., ch. (plural chs.), col. (cols.), ed., edn, f. (ff.), fo. (fos.), i.e. (in footnotes and square bracketed text within quotations only; otherwise 'that is' in full), l. (ll.), m. (mm.), MS (MSS), p. (pp.), r. (recto), s.v. (sub voce/verbo), v. (verso/versus); seq. should not be used; 'for example' should always be in full¹⁷

The level of detail is useful, but simultaneously off-putting.

When I was a part-time Open University tutor over a decade ago I wrote about the proliferation of referencing, 'the pernicious bindweed of academia', and the way that an obsession with the minutiae of referencing systems can potentially be used to frustrate and exclude aspiring students. 'In this reading an excessive emphasis on the scholarly apparatus (particularly as a means of avoiding the accusation of plagiarism) has become a way of preserving mystique and "otherness" – a secret language for the initiated few.' Indeed, 'Far from connecting individual students to the wider academic community it potentially alienates many, particularly those without an HE heritage. It is another thing to get wrong and feel stupid or inadequate about.'¹⁸

Stylistic conventions and referencing systems potentially play a similar role for aspiring researchers. Some journals recommend citing authors' and editors' surnames in the form in which they appear in the work cited; others prefer a more standardised approach. Some require 'p.' or 'pp.' for page references; others do not. Some accept '*ibid.*'; others reject it. Some require page references for citations of newspapers; others do not. The list of minor variations is endless. What is sometimes proclaimed as academic rigour can sometimes appear to be a façade behind which to protect the mystery of the trade.

The importance of accuracy, clarity and the checkability of references is not in doubt. But the rationale for some of these minor differences has never been adequately explained. The nuances and variations between different journals

¹⁷ https://pastandpresent.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/PP-Style-Guide-19_3_19.pdf (accessed 29 May 2023).

¹⁸ John Sanders, 'Horray for Harvard? The Fetish of Footnotes Revisited'. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 12 (2010), 48.

(even those in the same stable) bear comparison with the customs tariffs and duties of the Holy Roman Empire. When you cross the border from one journal to another (after the common and salutary experience of rejection) there is always a price to pay in terms of time to reconfigure the submission. It may be good for the soul, but is it really necessary? This is not to argue that scholars should not be meticulous, but the frontier between fastidious and farcical is perhaps too often breached.

We are consistently told that history is for everyone and academic institutions rightly celebrate their star historians and their broader contributions to the public realm. But this beneficence is very much on their terms. Many universities have hundreds of aspiring researchers on their doorstep who are unable to access resources that they, through their taxes, have partly funded.

While care is needed when dealing with collections of precious and delicate records in their stewardship, the same practical constraints do not apply to the vast store of secondary resources and digital material that university libraries hold. This is not to advocate an unregulated free for all. Rather it is suggested that current policies and licensing agreements require a reappraisal and that the balance between public good and private gain needs to be recalibrated. Like the obstacles placed before ramblers seeking to access the countryside nearly a century ago, the barriers faced by aspiring researchers seem unnecessary and fundamentally anti-democratic. The right to roam the country's historical records and secondary sources needs to be reasserted.

Similarly, while not advocating a standard-gauge submission template, some rationalisation and simplification of the plethora of house styles for academic journals would not go amiss. If publications are serious about their aspirations to encourage contributions from a more diverse range of authors, one starting point would be a review of their submission protocols and practices. More generally, publishers are keen to highlight the threats to UK research competitiveness from Open Access initiatives in science,¹⁹ but are seemingly reluctant to acknowledge their privileged position in the chain of knowledge transmission. Equally, there is little recognition that not every potential contributor is going to be university-based or that a more complex scholarly multiverse is emerging though the spread of new technologies and recalibrations of work/life balance.

If not guaranteeing the advent of the next Mantel or Midwinter, a greater appreciation of the contribution and needs of non-affiliated scholars would encourage the emergence of more diverse authorial voices and new lines of research. This in turn would provide an accessible bridge to the mass of people whose enthusiasm and interest – whether listening to podcasts, subscribing to history magazines or researching their family tree – provide the lifeblood of the subject.

¹⁹ <https://www.publishers.org.uk/economic-impact-of-open-access-policy/> (accessed 3 July 2023).