

## IN THE BEGINNING: THE GENESIS AND EARLY YEARS OF THE *HES BULLETIN*

BY  
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In 1978, at the fifth annual meeting of the History of Economics Society (HES) in Toronto, the HES board voted to begin publication of the *HES Bulletin*. I was not at that meeting, but my friend and former classmate, Larry Moss, was there and filled me in on the proceedings of the discussion. (While admittedly what follows is second-hand reporting filtered by a somewhat hazy memory, I believe it is basically an accurate account of the discussion.) According to Larry, the whole idea of starting an official publication of HES was controversial.

After four years in existence, many thought it was time for the society to have an official publication of some sort to enhance communication among members. At first, Craufurd Goodwin, the editor of *History of Political Economy (HOPE)*, was approached to see if *HOPE* could become aligned with the society in some way. I don't know any of the details of that discussion, but I do know that neither Craufurd nor Duke University Press was receptive to the idea of becoming affiliated with HES.

I understand that there was also some brief discussion about the possibility of HES starting its own journal, but the worry there was that perhaps there was not enough room in the small field of the history of economic thought to support two high-quality journals. A HES publication could potentially siphon off articles from *HOPE*, leaving both journals unable to survive. And at least one member of the executive committee was opposed to the whole idea of a HES periodical at all. Finally, someone came up with the idea of publishing something less than a full journal: its format was vague but at the very least it would be intended to serve as a means of communication among members to inform them of activities of interest to historians of economic thought and, it was hoped, also to provide a way in which research could be shared. The idea was to produce something more than a newsletter but less than a full journal. (I can't remember if someone on the executive committee came up with the name *HES Bulletin* or if that was my idea.)

Having agreed (albeit not unanimously) to launch an official publication, the executive committee then had to decide whom to approach to take on the job as editor. The ideal editor would be someone young who would view setting up the *Bulletin* from

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scratch to be a privilege rather than a burden, and this person would best be located at a not-very-well-known university that would welcome the recognition that publication would bring to it. At some point in the deliberations, Larry Moss suggested that I would be a good candidate. I was young, and I had just accepted a position at George Mason University (GMU)—a relatively new university that was virtually unknown and eager for recognition. And why might I consider editing the *Bulletin* as a privilege? In large part because of my deep commitment to HES.

I had been a member of HES since its inception. Indeed, in the spring of 1973, the year before the inaugural meeting of the society in Chapel Hill, I attended a conference on the history of economic thought organized by Warren Samuels and Bill Grampp. The purpose was to see if there was enough interest in the field to justify trying to form a society. Since about seventy people registered for the event, clearly there was enough interest. At that time, I was teaching at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, as was Hans Jensen. Hans, the department chair, was also an historian of economic thought, so there was no question but that both of us would fly to Chicago to take part in what was to be an historic gathering. I don't remember many details of that day fifty years ago. I know there were presentations by Warren Samuels, Sam Hollander, Vince Tarascio, William Jaffé. I know there were more speakers on the one-day program, but who they were escapes me now. I do remember that, besides being awed by the presence of so many luminaries in our field, I was thrilled to see so many other people interested in a field that was supposedly dying. The following year, when the notice went out that the first meeting of the History of Economics Society was to be held in Chapel Hill, I immediately registered and even managed to get on the program.

In those days it was a thrill for me to attend the annual meetings, to get to know others in my field personally and to learn from others who were as fascinated by the evolution of ideas as I was. We have probably all experienced the feeling of isolation that comes from working in a field that is barely acknowledged as legitimate inquiry by one's colleagues. HES showed me that I was not alone. I relished the annual meetings. In those days there were no concurrent sessions, so everyone got together in the same room to hear the same presentations. That shared experience fostered a sense of academic camaraderie that I missed in my normal academic life. HES was important to me so, yes, I really was flattered to be asked to contribute to the society as editor of this new, still-to-be-formed publication.

I was approached about being the *Bulletin* editor in June 1978 at the annual meeting held in Toronto that year. Since I had just been appointed associate professor at George Mason University starting in September of that year, I needed to be sure my new department chair, William P. Snavely, was on board with my taking on this added responsibility. Fortunately, he immediately saw the benefit to the university and to the department to be the home of a new academic periodical, no matter how modest. He agreed to provide me with secretarial help, and I was on my way. I was able to start trying to put together a publication that fulfilled (and I hoped would exceed) the board's expectations. (By the way, the same committee member who opposed starting the *Bulletin* also opposed me being chosen to edit it, and predictably was against mentioning George Mason University at all. Needless to say, his objections were overruled!)

But how was I to start? Fortunately, one of my colleagues at GMU was beginning to edit a journal of his own, and he put me in touch with a local woman who single-handedly produced all manner of printed matter from her home office. She had the

salutary virtues of being both reliable and cheap—the latter a very necessary feature, given my budget. The year 1979 was early days in the digital age, so I don't remember what technology she used to put out the issues. I assume it was a word processor, but for all I know she was typesetting the copy by hand! (I wish I could remember her name because she was the one who came up with the catchy cover design.) I would gather the material to include in the issue, give her the order in which I more or less wanted the copy to be presented, and she would do a layout for my approval. I remember that I had to try to keep page numbers to multiples of four so that we wouldn't have expensive blank pages at the back of the *Bulletin*.

In retrospect, physically putting the *Bulletin* together was time-consuming but not really difficult. I rather enjoyed the whole production end of the endeavor. At first, my biggest worry was that I might not receive enough submissions to actually flesh out an issue. Still, the first issue, dated Winter 1979, was off to a good start. At twenty-nine pages long, the biggest chunk of the copy in the first issue was a report on each of the sessions of the 1978 conference in Toronto, written by Timothy O'Neill. O'Neill had been writing these reports to be distributed to the membership ever since the annual meetings began. Indeed, I suspect that the popularity of his reports with the membership was a contributing factor to the decision to start the *Bulletin* in the first place. In addition to his report, the first issue included an announcement of the sixth annual HES meeting to take place in May 1979 in Champaign-Urbana, as well as announcements of other professional meetings of interest to society members. And, importantly, there were several short notes—"Babbage on Monopoly Pricing" by George Stigler, and one on computerized text processing by David Levy—as well as minutes of the business meeting and a financial report of the society. That first issue also introduced a rather whimsical feature called "The Lighter Side," which was intended to include jokes, puns, and limericks that historians of economic thought (and perhaps no one else) would find entertaining. Royall Brandis, HES president in 1979–80, was especially delighted by that feature and frequently contributed a chuckle! For the record, there were no referees. The *Bulletin* was not meant to be a refereed journal, simply a way for members to learn what others were working on.

Despite my initial concerns about securing content for publication, Issue #2 was even livelier than the first issue. That one contained short articles by Vince Tarascio, Daniel Fufeld, Ralph Pfouts, and Robert Collison-Black, as well as a research inquiry by Warren Samuels and Charles Blicht. Issue #3 was graced once again by contributions from George Stigler and David Levy. At the 1980 meeting in Boston, HES presented its first Distinguished Fellow Award to William Jaffé, so naturally his acceptance talk, as well as all subsequent ones, was published as well. Other innovations followed.

For instance, in volume II, number 1, instead of printing O'Neill's report of the previous HES meeting, we moved to having participants supply abstracts for publication. In volume II, number 2, we began publishing the Presidential Address for the first time, that one by Royall Brandis. In volume III, number 1, we added one more feature—publishing the Invited Lectures, the first one given by Frank Fetter—and in volume III, number 2, we began printing the preliminary program for the next annual meeting.

In sum, the first three years of the *Bulletin* clearly appeared to be all we had hoped it would be. Up until then, if submissions were lagging, I would start making phone calls soliciting contributions. Fortunately, I didn't have to do that very often as I had some reliable helpers whom I could count on to send me something interesting. But by volume

IV, submissions began to lag. We still had all the important announcements but fewer short notes and articles. The question was, “Why?” One reason may have been that writing short notes for the *Bulletin* did not carry much of a payoff for young academics who were otherwise focused on submitting articles to refereed journals. It is instructive that with few exceptions, in the first three volumes, it was senior scholars who contributed the short articles and notes. But I have to confess to a second reason for the change.

In 1982, I was appointed chairperson of my department and so had less time to cajole people to send in material for the *Bulletin*. With all my new administrative responsibilities, sadly, being editor of the *Bulletin* finally became more of a burden than a privilege. Hence, in 1983, I wrote to the executive committee to inform them that I wished to resign as editor after volume V was completed. I reported that I believed the *Bulletin* in its then current format was probably not sustainable. I thought it would be necessary at some point to expand it into a real journal to ensure its long-run survival, but I did not have the time or the resources to take on that job. Fortunately, the executive committee found a new editor who was willing to take up the challenge. Bill Thweat not only revived the *Bulletin* but brought it to new heights. And, finally, under the direction of Don Walker, the small publication that I was privileged to edit evolved into a bona fide scholarly journal. When Don Walker called me to let me know that the *Bulletin* was finally going to be turned into the *Journal of the History of Economic Thought (JHET)*, a scholarly refereed journal, I couldn’t have been more delighted. Having our own journal was evidence of the health and continuing growth of the History of Economics Society as well as of the discipline as a whole. I was very pleased to have had a small hand in bringing it about. So, thank you, Bill, Donald, and all the rest of you former and current editors who have worked so hard to make *JHET* the excellent journal that it is today.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests exist.