Review of books: A retrospective glance

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What is the role of book reviews in the Internet era? Such was the query of a colleague upon learning of my appointment as Book Review Editor of the Accounting Historians Journal (AHJ). When we are able to download books and journals, as well as create and read online reviews at our favorite Internet bookstore, does the published book review serve any purpose? Not wanting to eliminate my position at its outset, I decided that a useful way to answer this question would be to revisit and re-examine previous book reviews in AHJ.

BOOK REVIEWS IN AHJ

Since its inception in 1977, AHJ has published approximately 300 book reviews of newly published and reprinted works. A quick glance at the works reviewed, their authors and reviewers, indicates the breadth of publishing in accounting history and provides a who's who of members of the discipline. We find books and reviews by Zeff, Winjum, Schoenfeld, Wells, Kawahara, Katano, and Woolf. Many individuals have contributed to both sides of the ledger, authoring and editing volumes, as well as reviewing them. Themes appear and re-appear, such as double-entry bookkeeping, standard costing, financial reporting, and accounting theory. The reviews demonstrate the global dispersion of the discipline, with works emanating from Asia and the Pacific Rim, Europe and the U.K., Scandinavia, and North America.

AHJ replaced The Accounting Historian, with its first three volumes reproducing its predecessor. The following section samples the book reviews contained in these three volumes. The
selections are a personal choice, not a statistical sample. They cover the broad range of topics and geography contained in the cohort of 22 reviews. After excerpting these reviews, I provide a brief summary of key points. The latter illustrate the continued value of the review vehicle to highlight ever-important topics in accounting history research and historical research more generally.

EXCERPTS FROM AHJ, VOLUME 1, NUMBERS 1-4, 1974


reviewed by Marc J. Epstein (pp. 36-37)

Though Yamey, Edey, and Thomson provided an introduction and overview to the development of accountancy in England..., no comprehensive study has been made of the development of accounting in this period in England. Further, though the Sombart thesis is a well accepted notion, a rigorous test of that thesis had not been conducted. James Winjum successfully completes both tasks...Central to the entire study is the test of the Sombart thesis that double-entry bookkeeping was ‘both a manifestation of the spirit of capitalism in its formative decades as well as a propulsive agency furthering a significant economic and cultural development.’ Through an examination of extant accounting treatises and textbooks and merchant accounts of England (1500-1750), Winjum finds the proof necessary to support the thesis...

Over the last few years, discussion has continued on the validity of the Sombart thesis. The contribution of this test of the thesis is obvious. It is also important to note the research methodology employed. Winjum’s study provides the results of extensive investigation into both treatises and original records and provides a thorough discussion of the previous support of the thesis by influ-
ential scholars. 'Scissors and paste history' is clearly not being used here in this carefully researched study...

The book is a major contribution to the literature of accounting history generally and English economic and accounting history specifically...The book is highly recommended as evidence of quality accounting history research.


reviewed by Hugh Hughes (pp. 39-40)

The New Deal, broadly perceived as a reform movement, has been the subject of previous comprehensive studies. As Parrish notes in the introduction, he is concerned with illuminating 'a portion of the larger debate; the relationship between American businessmen and reform.' He attempts to identify the reformers, their motivations, and the consequences of reform....

This is no Cinderella tale which Parrish relates - it is a study of legislation incessantly attacked by detractors who in some instances do manage to dilute or eliminate what appear to have been worthwhile reforms. The personal papers are particularly helpful here in shedding light on the feelings and frustrations of both advocates and foes of these measures and of the philosophies motivating them.

An important feature of the book is that it is not primarily concerned with the accounting professor or accounting practices. Accountants... are but one of a number of parties whom Parrish attempts to place in perspective, and it is this perspective that today's accounting practitioner or professor should find of most benefit...

To the accounting historian, the book is signifi-
cant for this same perspective, for the evolutionary study of a government institution of primary importance to accountants, and for its methodology.

EXCERPTS FROM AHJ, VOLUME 2, NUMBERS 1-4, 1975

Hanns-Martin W. Schoenfeld, Cost Terminology and Cost Theory: A Study of its Development and Present State in Central Europe, Monograph 8 (Center for International Education and Research in Accounting, 1974, 177 pp.)
reviewed by M.C. Wells (pp. 74-76)

This monograph contains a comprehensive and readable account of the development of various theories of production costs by prominent German writers. For those of us who are incompetent in any but our own language, it is a long overdue introduction to a highly developed and rather specialized field...

Of particular interest to accounting historians will be Schoenfeld’s description of the origins of various cost theories, the background of the German Uniform Chart of Accounts and his evaluation of European theory development. Throughout that development, the close connection between cost accounting and economics is clearly drawn.

Schoenfeld has adopted the role of reporter, not advocate. His monograph is a work to be taken seriously and studied closely by all who profess an interest in cost accounting practices and theories. Although the emphasis on German literature is somewhat narrower than the title implies, the English language literature has been considerably enhanced by this addition.

EXCERPTS FROM AHJ, VOLUME 3, NUMBERS 1-4, 1976

Doris Langley Moore, Lord Byron Accounts Rendered (Harper & Row, Publishers, 1974, 511 pp.)

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reviewed by Hans Johnson (pp. 92-94)

Lord Byron is remembered today for his literary genius and controversial lifestyle. Lord Byron Accounts Rendered is the author's second biographical study of the poet. In her latest effort, Moore has tapped a previously unused wealth of documentary evidence pertaining to Byron's financial affairs. Antonio Lega Zambelli, Lord Byron's trusted aide, kept meticulous records of incomes and expenditures...Such is the volume of documentation that author Moore comments, 'we have Byron's domestic economy so minutely yet unconsciously reflected that there can scarcely be anything comparable in the annals of famous men...'

Accounting historians interested in the biographical use of personal financial information will find the book beneficial as an example of research technique and synthesis of complex evidential material. Moore's approach is chronological with interpretation of important events and personalities based upon her study of the Zambelli records. The author, being very knowledgeable on the life of Byron, carefully weaves personalities, places and events together with monetary exchanges in such a manner as to reveal interesting new insights...

SUMMARY

Although the sample of reviews is small and constrained, these reviews and the source books provide the accounting historian with insights that remain relevant long after their initial publication. The reviews provide glimpses that enable the reader/researcher to determine the overall theme of the original work, its potential relevance to his or her own research, and hopefully motivation for the reader to explore further. Reviews can provide a starting point from which to obtain a form of triangulation for research of a similar nature. Finally, the review reveals the reviewer and the perspective that he or she has adopted.
Even if the review does not prompt one to seek out the original source, certain themes evident in these reviews strike a chord with accounting historians:

• Accounting in its context — the reviews all demonstrate that accounting cannot be studied outside of its context, be it economic, political, social, or cultural.

• Accounting as part of everyday life — the account of Byron is a good example of this feature of accounting, a role and the power of which are increasingly recognized in our accounting history research.

• The linkage of accounting to other disciplines — this linkage is evident, be it economics (as with cost accounting in Germany) or the influence of political economy (as in terms of the New Deal).

• The importance of sound methodology — the reviews all note the careful attention to methodology, sources, documentation, and evidence.

• Perspective — as we write history, we adopt a perspective. Recognizing this point of view is necessary in order to write convincingly.

Whether we write books or launch our research on an Internet site, these points remain a relevant and requisite part of our accounting history craft.