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Introducing business historian Howell John Harris

> It is both pleasant and curiously unsettling to be told by my peers that nothing I've done since I was in my 20s has quite matched up to the stuff that I wrote before I knew how.
>
> Howell John Harris (2012)

Business historian Howell John Harris is Professor with the Department of History at Durham University in England. His first book, *The Right to Manage: Industrial Relations Policies of American Business in the 1940s*, was published in 1982. The book was based on his doctoral thesis, *Getting Everybody Back on the Same Team: An Interpretation of the Industrial Relations Policies of American Business in the 1940s*, defended in 1979. Highly unusual for a young scholar's first publication, the book was awarded the Philip-Taft Labor History Prize. Thirty years later, in 2012, the *Labor History* journal confirmed the book's enduring legacy with a symposium entitled 'Assessing Howell John Harris, *The Right to Manage*, after 30 Years'. However, Howell's rather unpromising doctoral beginnings would have never predicted his successful academic career, let alone the professional accolades that were to be bestowed on it ever since 1982. In 1974, for example, a tutor was concluding his comments on Howell's course paper as follows (Neufeld 1974):

> Apart from these lapses, which made your paper resemble a conventional term report, there is the obstacle of your prose style! Your ideas and your ability to develop them are first-rate. However, you conceal them under such turgid and undisciplined prose that I had to read every sentence several times in order to garner the full substance of your thought. Since your prose style is unfair to the reader, I picket you.

Howell's autobiographical essay published here recounts his experiences as a young business historian embarking upon a PhD (called DPhil, at the University of Oxford). Howell's account is very honest, showing the uncertainties, and the trials and tribulations, that even committed research students face—it is far from a triumphant pilgrim's progress.

The institutional circumstances in which Howell undertook his research at the University of Oxford and at Cornell University were very different from current conditions. Oxford, particularly in the social sciences in the 1970s, and Cornell were very different from each other, and both were very different from the current institutional context in Hungary. In the 1970s, there was no business school in

Oxford and no management faculty. There were, however, an emergent sociology faculty and a strong, research-oriented, industrial relations group. As for business historians, they were thrown on their own resources. In contrast, Cornell had a business school, a large sociology faculty, and an internationally distinguished New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, which is where Howell came to be based. Few institutions now have the financial resources available to Oxford and Cornell in the 1970s—less time, and less indulgence, is allowed to graduate students. Formal graduate programmes, with coursework requirements, structure research student time and provide guidelines, sometimes even instructions, on how to carry out research. Despite differences in time and in circumstances, Howell's autobiographical essay underlines at least three everlasting messages for all PhD students—as well as being entertaining in its own right.

First, there are many reasons for doing a PhD—curiosity about a subject in general or about a particular issue, for example, or the desire to follow a distinguished academic career or a career as a highly paid consultant. But one of the worst reasons for doing a PhD is doing a PhD because of the lack of an alternative—it inevitably leads to drift and lack of direction. Doing a PhD is a difficult, arduous, and often lonely journey, requiring high levels of personal drive and commitment—even in well-organised graduate schools, with careful and knowledgeable supervision. The second message relates to the importance of defining a topic—and, even more significantly, the importance of identifying a question which you are seriously interested in answering. Defining the research question, even more than finding a research topic, determines the scope of the PhD thesis—and the probability of successful completion. Third, relations with supervisors are critical. In some cases, PhD students are junior members of existing research groups. As such, the research question is defined by the PhD supervisor, the research methods are specified by the group, and the role of the PhD student is to apply these methods correctly. In other circumstances, students are left on their own. Universities, and faculties within universities, differ in approach. As Howell's account shows, in the 1970s, Oxford was at the extreme end of allowing students to define their own questions and methods of research—this *laissez faire* approach suited well very determined students, but was potentially disastrous for wavering students. Whatever the approach, however, relations with supervisors—as both mentors and first ports of call—are critical.

Management is a very diverse discipline, where business history is very different from, say, operations management—sources of data, ways of securing access, modes of analysis, and the structure of argumentation all differ. They differ to such an extent, in effect, that, despite their enduring relevance, management journals rarely venture as far as publishing business history articles. Therefore, it

is very much to the credit of both author and journal to publish such a candid, reflective account on becoming a business historian—a management article truly ‘unusual in more ways than one’.

References

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