

By Arthur H. Cole

LIBRARIAN EMERITUS
THE BAKER LIBRARY
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Notes on the Diminution of Pressures in the Writing of Business Histories

WHILE I must rank as an amateur as far as the composition of business histories is concerned, I have been close to the compounding of several such items and I venture also to draw on my experience as administrator of other institutions for stratagems of operation that might be helpful.

1. I noted that both Professors Overton and Hidy assumed that the agreement with a company would include the specification of actual publication. I do recall that Professor Robert S. Smith of Duke wrote up the history of a cotton mill in North Carolina, thinking that the concern would surely be glad to have its career broadcast, only to find that the officers and directors saw no advantage themselves when the author had completed his study, and actually he had found no skeletons in any closet.

2. It would seem to me almost essential that, before a scholar begins even to consider the undertaking of a company study, the books and papers of the concern should be assembled and arranged in proper order by experienced business archivists.

3. I should think it advantageous for the prospective author to have the privilege of hiring, and in fact to hire a young assistant to work somewhat with the foregoing archivists, and to be present at the discussions with the officers of the concern. This was a scheme on which the Committee on Research in Economic History had agreed in its later years, whenever the undertaking of a large project was being debated. The young man should be initiated early and be present at all debates with the company officials.

4. I liked the arrangement that Professor Harold Williamson devised in several of his projects as far as staffing was concerned, namely, the adding of a younger person as co-author. That should surely increase the young person's interest in the project and would almost surely enhance his sense of responsibility for the work as a whole.

5. Also I liked Williamson's scheme of placing insurance on the health, even the life, of all persons connected with a large research activity. In a case of unforeseen difficulties, the director of the project would then have a financial means for covering the added costs of training a new person into the half-

finished activities of the individual who had had to withdraw or had become incapacitated. Probably the head of the scheme should carry insurance on his own life and health. All such protection should help to reduce the nervous pressures on the individual responsible for the whole enterprise.

6. Probably it is no loss of time and avoidance of trouble if the number of printed output to go to the active participants should be spelled out early. Young folk seem to think that they will be entitled to almost any number of copies at the end.

7. Of course participants should be bound to remaining with the project until it is completed, if this attachment is at all possible. There seems great loss of momentum if new people have to be added in mid-stream, so to speak.

In general, I venture to suggest that the appropriate concept for the director of a large company history to have or keep in his mind is not that of building a house next door while one remains comfortably housed in an adequate shelter, but that of constructing a skyscraper in a congested business quarter of a metropolis. In the latter case, delivery and incorporation of materials must be carefully scheduled, and no absences of personnel can be tolerated—at least without the possibility of immediate replacement—all in the endeavor to see that a given date of completion is attained. The composition of a large business history would appear more an engineering activity than that of a simple handicraftsman.