

1 Introduction

Robin is a historian in a British university (although he does not in fact exist). He has a short-term teaching contract with the department in which he recently completed his PhD; he has published one of its chapters in a journal which (if his peers are to be believed) seems to be respectably middle-ranking. On his better days Robin very much intends to turn the thesis into his first book, although somehow it seems to be the wrong shape to be easily adapted, and so work on it has so far been slow and without enthusiasm.

Robin has a good friend from another university, called Lucy. Her research is on a similar area, and the two have met regularly at conferences, anxiously trading stories about the academic job market in the faded bars of university halls of residence. They are organising a conference together, at which several mutual friends will deliver papers. They have been in touch with a publisher who (after some delay and many emails) has agreed to consider publishing an edited collection of those papers. It has the working title *Religion, Politics and Culture in Early Modern Europe*.

The conference takes place. In the final session they outline the idea of the book and invite the speakers to submit abstracts of their papers for consideration. A short document of two or three paragraphs is distributed, outlining the theme. After a couple of months the abstracts arrive, just enough of them to form a typically sized volume. There are papers on music at the court of Henry VIII, on government and theocracy in Calvin's Geneva, on the regulation of space in the Palace of Versailles, on censorship of religious literature in Copenhagen, and more. Robin and Lucy decide to accept all the papers and assure the publisher that the book can be ready within two years. In the meantime, Robin's former supervisor, who is called Philip, has agreed to include a paper he gave some years ago at a different event on a loosely related topic; Lucy's supervisor has agreed to write a preface.

Six months later, the deadline for the full drafts is reached. Seven of the twelve drafts have arrived; three of these are significantly longer than the word limit set; one bears no resemblance to the abstract; one is almost unreadable. Of the five delinquents, three are apologetic and promise to

do better; two have not replied to successive emails. There then begin many long months of haggling and heartache. Philip, rather more senior than either Robin or Lucy, seems unimpressed with their attempts to persuade him to amend his draft to focus more on the theme, and they back down. They have a nagging feeling that Helen's work is rather superficial and hasty, but do not know enough about Calvin's Geneva to challenge her. Two of the missing five drafts arrive; more emails are sent. Michael, under pressure from his university, withdraws his paper on Copenhagen in order to submit it to a 'top journal'. The two-year deadline comes and goes.

Eventually, Robin and Lucy decide that the papers in hand are all they are likely to have, and send the draft to the publisher. Their introduction, jointly written, is a baroquely inventive attempt to draw common themes from very disparate papers. After another year it appears in print, in an expensive hardback edition. Their publisher seems unwilling to invest in publicising it, so Robin and Lucy do what they can on social media. After two more years, it has been purchased by a handful of libraries; there have been no reviews. Robin has not written his book, and has taken on his third temporary teaching contract. Lucy has left the profession.

Although Robin and Lucy's tale is a fictional one, their experience embodies all the elements of a pervasive negative perception of the edited collection as a publishing format which has solidified in recent years. Two inexperienced editors convince an unenthusiastic publisher to accept a collection which contains essays only loosely connected, has little to say as a whole and answers no questions that are being asked. They are neither able to convince their contributors to produce their work in good time, nor to exert effective editorial control over the work that does materialise. Published years later than originally intended, the publisher, recognising its limitations, abandons the book to its fate, and it sinks without trace, leaving the editors with little to show for their heartache save their own copies. It is, however, not merely a story of the mishaps that beset most projects at one time or another, but a reflection of a latent but powerful general theory of the format.

The elements of this general theory may be stated as follows. Edited collections are widely suspected to contain work of a generally lower standard than scholarly journals, due largely to a less stringent regime of quality control; they are also supposed to be incoherent as volumes, being often no more than the sum of their parts; they take an inordinate amount of time from inception to completion, and are (it is thought) less visible to potential readers once published. By no means would all individual authors accept the critique. However, it is often taken as axiomatic that those who make important decisions in relation to hiring, promotion, tenure and funding do so agree, even if they themselves are also authors. To publish in or edit an essay collection (it is thought) is thus to risk being penalised for the format before even a word is read.

The extent to which the perception has spread is evident in a survey questionnaire of scholars in the humanities, completed in the autumn of 2018.¹ In the previous five years, more than half (56 per cent) of those who responded had been advised against publishing their work in edited collections. Although only 5 per cent reported formal institution-wide advice against the format, more than a quarter had been so advised by senior staff in their departments, and 13 per cent in formal training or career development settings. Advice from peers was also influential, both within the same institution (24 per cent) and elsewhere (27 per cent).²

¹ The humanities were defined in line with the qualification for Main Panel D of the UK's Research Excellence Framework, and as such excluded archaeology, law and architecture. A total of 363 complete (or usefully incomplete) responses were received, of which approximately half (181) were from the UK; a further 74 responses (20 per cent) were from the USA, 48 from elsewhere in Europe and 26 from Canada. Of these, 156 respondents (43 per cent) stated their primary discipline to be history; 79 (22 per cent) English language and literature; 27 (7 per cent) communication, cultural and media studies; 23 (6 per cent) modern languages and linguistics; 17 (5 per cent) for both classics and art and design; and 13 responses (4 per cent) for theology and religious studies. Responses for philosophy, music, film studies, and drama and dance each made up less than 3 per cent of the total.

² The pattern was largely consistent between different nations, with responses from the UK and the USA to this question (which between them formed nearly half of the results of the total) showing a comparable result (58 per cent).

This would be of no great significance if those receiving such advice thought it both justified in principle and beneficial for themselves in particular. However, the same survey revealed a marked misalignment between scholars' perceptions of (on the one hand) the best interests of their discipline, and what would best aid their own career, on the other. When thinking in terms of the health of their discipline, respondents were asked to choose one of four statements that best reflected their view. Were book chapters an 'essential part of scholarly publishing [which] add value of a different kind', or 'quite useful but secondary to journal articles'? Or, were they 'a waste of time [which] should be avoided'? Or did it not matter: was the key factor 'the quality and significance of what I write'? Just under a third of respondents thought chapters essential, one in four regarded them as secondary to journal articles; only a very few (4 per cent) thought that they should be avoided.

However, the responses were markedly different when the same question was framed in terms of career progression. Now, the choice of format was rather more important: where previously 38 per cent had thought that the publishing format was immaterial, now only 18 per cent believed so. Four times as many now thought chapters a waste of time, and 44 per cent thought them secondary to journal articles. Respondents were also asked to state what they thought was the general view of their peers on the same questions, and responses were markedly more negative again. Fully a quarter of respondents believed that their peers thought chapters should be avoided for the good of their careers, and another 46 per cent thought that their peers regarded them as secondary to journal articles.

This Element is the first extended critical examination of both perception and the reality of the edited collection of essays as a means of scholarly communication. I contend that the edited collection has a unique role to play in the communication of research both within and outside the universities. I also argue that, although all of the features of Robin and Lucy's experience are real, several have been overstated and none of them are inevitable. Section 2 examines the twentieth-century history of the format, and its many and changing functions in humanities publishing. Section 3 sets out the overall shape and the individual elements of the critique of the edited collection in more detail, and shows that few of them have firm basis

in fact, and those that are so grounded are far from insoluble. The Conclusion looks to the future, and to an idea of scholarly community, much occluded, that the edited collection affords. But the recent history of that critique, and the manner in which it has been communicated, is in itself an instructive episode in the history of ideas.

Since it is some way outside my own specialism, I make no claim for the discipline of memetics in general, and the degree to which it matches psychological reality. Metaphorically, at least, the cluster of suppositions about the edited collection bears many of the marks of what Richard Dawkins termed a ‘meme complex’.³ The complex of individual ideas (or memes) about the edited collection have all functioned in a largely unexamined way, but with an unusual degree of ‘memetic fitness’ in the struggle of ideas to survive and spread. That fitness has perhaps been due to some of their structural features as ideas. They are simple and memorable: ‘edited collections are to be avoided’; they are psychologically attractive (in that they appeal to basic instincts of professional self-preservation) and are also conducive to action (or, in this case, the active eschewing of certain choices of where to publish). All of these are features of memes most likely to survive, replicate and displace others in human subjects. There is a certain irony in the fact that the humanities, dedicated as they are to the critical examination of ideas, have internalised this particular complex of memes with little challenge or debate.

When did this ‘crisis of the edited collection’ begin? (How old, as it were, is this meme complex?) There are isolated pieces of evidence of scholarly concern dating back decades, such as that from the psychologist (and later pioneer of the Open Access (OA) movement) Stevan Harnad in 1986, who thought it ‘folly . . . to bury what one takes to be good papers in edited conference volumes’.⁴ In the humanities, the evidence is much less clear. Some of those I interviewed recalled advice against publishing their work in this format before the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise in the

³ C. von Bülow, ‘Mem’, in J. Mittelstraß (ed.), *Enzyklopädie Philosophie und Wissenschaftstheorie* (2nd edition, volume 5, Springer, 2013), pp. 318–24.

⁴ S. Harnad, ‘On reviewing (and publishing in) edited interdisciplinary volumes’, *Contemporary Psychology* 31 (5), 1986, 390.

UK (of which, more in Section 3). As an early career scholar, I myself was certainly advised by a senior colleague (in 2004) against editing such a volume on the grounds that they were poorly regarded and not widely read.

However, by virtue of their verbal transmission and anecdotal nature, the spread of these memes is hard to trace. Only after the middle of the first decade of the century do critiques and defences of the format begin to appear on the academic Web, in a trickle which became a steady flow after 2010. Little of this literature is formally published, although the last five years have seen a handful of studies in aspects of the issue. Much of it appears in the form of personal reflections from editors, publishers and authors,⁵ and as career advice to early career scholars.⁶ Criticisms of the genre are drawn from across the disciplines, but in particular from the social sciences; the genre has also had its defenders.

1.1 Definitions

Of what do we speak when we speak of the ‘edited collection’? The term has been made to encompass a number of distinct although related forms of publication. Here I define it in terms of three criteria: its contents, the

⁵ Examples not cited elsewhere include: M. E. Smith, ‘Why are so many edited volumes worthless?’, *Publishing Archaeology*, 26 August 2007, retrieved 1 May 2019 from <http://publishingarchaeology.blogspot.com/2007/08/why-are-so-many-edited-volumes.html>; A. Hacker, ‘In defense of the edited book’, *A Hacker’s View*, 3 December 2013, retrieved 1 March 2019 from www.andreahacker.com/in-defense-of-the-edited-book/; M. Kremakova, ‘What’s so bad about book chapters? Nothing really’, *The Sociological Imagination* (9 June 2016), retrieved 17 December 2019 from <https://web.archive.org/web/20170626034643/http://sociologicalimagination.org/archives/18684>.

⁶ Examples not cited elsewhere include: K. Kelsky, ‘Should I do an edited collection?’, *The Professor Is In*, 24 July 2012, retrieved 1 June 2018 from <http://theprofessorisin.com/2012/07/24/should-i-do-an-edited-collection/>; C. Guerin, ‘Journal article or book chapter?’, *Doctoral Writing Special Interest Group* (1 May 2014), retrieved 1 August 2018 from <https://doctoralwriting.wordpress.com/2014/05/01/journal-article-or-book-chapter/>.

process by which it comes into being, and the form and manner in which it is presented.

I define an edited collection as a group of written outputs, of a length comparable to an article in a learned journal. They will have been written by different authors, although individual chapters may have more than one author. I therefore set aside the monograph, and also the relatively rare species of the jointly written book, even if its chapters are individually attributed to one or more authors. This definition also excludes the genres of encyclopaedia and dictionary, on grounds of length (but includes the various species of companions and handbooks, as explained later). Even though some individual contributions to such books are of a length comparable to an article, the majority are in general not.

Secondly, these books are the result of a set of distinctive processes. These collections must necessarily have one or more editors, with whom rests the decision of which contributions are included and which are not. They may very often themselves contribute a preface, introduction, conclusion or epilogue; these will most likely state the larger intellectual problem to which the chapters address themselves, draw out themes in common, reflect on dissonance between the chapters and set out the implications for the field in the future. They may well (but do not always) intervene to shape the individual chapters to address the theme, in consultation with the author.

It is in this activist editorial role that we see most clearly the difference between the edited collection and the genre of the conference proceeding. While edited collections as I define them quite often have their genesis in a conference of some sort, the conference proceeding functions as the final record of an event. In general, the conference proceeding model in which papers are submitted and peer reviewed in advance and published simultaneously with the event is rare in the humanities, although very common in other disciplines.⁷ Even when (as is more common in the humanities), the publication takes place after the event, there is often a presumption that all

⁷ For more on the rather indistinct line between the two genres, see *Open Access and Book Chapters* (British Academy, 2019). I myself acted as a consultant to the team producing this report.

papers given at the conference will be included, subject to some basic tests of quality. The papers were likely to have been intellectually complete at the time of the conference, and they will not substantially change between event and publication, although a shortened version may have been read in person. The edited collection, in contrast, often bears a more distant relationship with the event: some contributions are not included, and others are included that were not presented at the event. As there is a greater lapse of time between event and publication, the potential for change and development in the text itself is greater, under the direction of the editor(s). The event is merely one single step in a process of development of a coherent set of essays.

Thirdly, the edited collection is very clearly packaged as a coherent whole. It will have a title that defines its scope and ambition as a monograph will, and most likely will be treated the same as a monograph for marketing and sales purposes. It is on these grounds, therefore, that I set aside the genre of the special issue of a journal. Although it meets my first two criteria, the special issue is quite distinct in several ways. It is rarely packaged in as distinctive and as durable a way, and is rarely subject to quite the same expectations of coherence and comprehensiveness. The edited collection also has a finality, or at least a closedness, which contrasts with the more open-ended nature of a journal, the continuing record of the deliberation of a community of scholars. I shall return to the issue of visibility in Section 3.

1.2 Companions and Handbooks

There is a further genre of academic publishing which meets all of the criteria of my definition – and is included here – but has some particular features of note: the various series of what are generally labelled ‘companions’ or ‘handbooks’. These may be distinguished from the encyclopaedia and the dictionary by virtue of the length of the contributions, which tends to be closer to that for a chapter or article. In general, their relation to their subject matter is distinctive. Rarely do they emerge from a conference or an open call for papers. Instead, the subject to be covered is tightly defined in advance, and contributions solicited to cover each aspect. Although the distinction is not absolute, handbooks and companions also tend to be

directed to subjects that are already thought to be important; it is relatively rare that an emerging field of study is dealt with in this way.

In the course of writing this Element, I interviewed a number of humanities scholars and librarians.⁸ One interviewee, a historian of modern Britain, thought the genre of handbooks or companions prone to a kind of intellectual conservatism – one that at its worst was an invitation to established scholars merely to restate their existing work in summary form rather than to break new ground. Although this is evidently a risk of the genre, it is often avoided, and such writings have been submitted to research assessment exercises such as the Research Excellence Framework in the UK, and received as world-leading research.⁹ Chapters that are formative and others that are merely summative may well appear in the same volume. Even at their most conservative, these books are clearly quite distinct from the genre of the textbook, although they may well be used in teaching. (Indeed, the textbook genre is by no means as secure a feature of the humanities as in other disciplines, but to explore that further is beyond my scope.¹⁰)

Compared to the edited volume at large, the companion and the handbook are relatively recent genres. The most well-established series of companions, from Cambridge University Press, was established in the late 1980s, beginning with figures in English literature (Shakespeare, Milton); volumes on the most significant philosophers began to appear in the early 1990s (Marx, Descartes and Plato among the early subjects). The series on music – dealing initially with individual composers and musical

⁸ In total, nineteen individuals were interviewed in late 2018 and early 2019, among them historians, theologians, musicologists and librarians. All but one were UK-based; most were in university settings, of various types, while others were active scholars and teachers employed by other institutions. Some were senior scholars, some in mid-career and others were early career scholars.

⁹ Research Excellence Framework 2014. *Overview Report by Main Panel D and Sub-panels 27 to 36*, retrieved 17 December 2019 from www.ref.ac.uk/2014/panels/paneloverviewreports/, p. 62.

¹⁰ On the problematic category of the textbook for history, see L. Jordanova, *History in Practice* (Arnold, 2000), pp. 18–19.

instruments – began in 1992 with volumes on Chopin and on the violin. The series expanded in scope by the millennium to encompass the theatre, and literatures other than English; volumes on the Bible and Christian doctrine appeared in 1997; major theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth were also dealt with, and the figure of Jesus himself in 2001. The series has continued to grow ever since.

I distinguished earlier between companions and handbooks on the one hand, and dictionaries and encyclopaedias on the other hand, on the grounds of the length of contributions. That these meanings of these terms have only stabilised in the last three decades is shown by volumes such as the *Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, first published in 1951 and in its fourth edition in 1983, which despite the name has all the features of the dictionary/encyclopaedia. However, Oxford University Press began a series of handbooks in the more recent sense in the mid-1980s, beginning with medicine, but after the millennium expanding into areas of the humanities, beginning with philosophy, theology and religious studies and subsequently including works of history and musicology. The series now contains several hundred volumes. It was closely followed by the series of Blackwell companions (now Wiley-Blackwell), founded in the late 1980s but picking up speed in the mid-1990s. The British publisher Ashgate (which was acquired by Informa, parent company of Taylor and Francis, in 2015) also had a series of ‘research companions’.¹¹ Begun in 2007, it continues under the Routledge imprint. Routledge had already an established handbook series, which began at much the same time and at the time of writing amounted to several hundred volumes, a significant proportion of which are in the humanities.

Finally, there are two genres of volume which share all the marks of the edited collection as I have defined it, but which I also set aside. I define an edited collection as one in which all (or nearly all) the content is written for the volume, or (at least) has not previously been published. There is a durable tradition of the republication in book form of the most significant

¹¹ ‘Informa pays £20m for Ashgate Publishing’, *The Bookseller*, 29 July 2015, retrieved on 7 March 2019 from www.thebookseller.com/news/informa-pays-20m-ashgate-publishing-308308.