

Correspondence

To the Editor of the Journal of British Studies:

In a sense all bibliographies are bad because they cannot satisfy every taste, and they can never be kept up to date. Let us also agree that the shortcomings and errors of a compiler must always compound these difficulties. I know that all of these had something to do with some of the omissions and errors which the British History sub-section of the *New Guide to Historical Literature* has charged against it. Some of them I knew about even before publication but did not try to change them because of what I thought were unchangeable limitations of time and space. Indeed, it is well to recall here that the editorial problems raised by the whole project were so great as to make one marvel at the patience and fortitude of the supervisory editorial committee.

The admission of shortcomings and an acknowledgement of the problems of editorial work does not, at the same time, mean that one should cry an abject *mea culpa* or agree that somehow the names of the American Historical Association and the sponsoring foundation have been besmirched. This is a conclusion which seems to stretch things more than just a little.

To clarify matters, it might be well if one or two rather cloudy imputations were dispelled.

Let us begin, first of all, with the question of numerical entries which has been alluded to in the correspondence to this *Journal* more than once. The number of listed entries for each section originally suggested by the supervising editors was 600. Because I undertook to compile materials for Ireland, Scotland, and Wales as well as England, I wrote and asked in advance for permission to expand the section to 715. Having done so, I assumed that the original deadline had to be kept; and I, therefore, submitted my manuscript to the editors more than three years before final publication. I later learned that others had a much longer period which they used to bring the materials up to date (or closer to it) and to expand their lists. When these longer selections were finally submitted (so I'm told), the general editors accepted them as they stood because they did not feel they could cut back the contribu-

tions of unpaid voluntary compilers. This latter decision did, however, put those of us who adhered to the original editorial regulations in an embarrassing position – even to the point of being accused by imputation of a kind of colossal ignorance for not compiling lists of a similar length. There is a sad bit of irony in all this, because the final list of 715 entries was cut from a list more than twice as long which included almost all the titles I have been charged with omitting or overlooking.

There were, moreover, certain other editorial limitations which do not seem to have been noticed in preceding correspondence. First of all, no medieval materials (including the writings of Frederick William Maitland) were included because the cut off date for the sub-section was 1485. For somewhat the same reason imperial, commonwealth, and colonial topics were omitted. My sub-section covered only domestic history, and it was for that reason and not for careless ones that even good friends, like Professor R. L. Schuyler, were omitted from the list. All autobiographical materials and journals were to have been excluded except in certain instances where there was nothing to substitute for them. Why certain cross references were or were not made, why some items were improperly identified, why some were included or excluded I shall never know completely and can only submit that all of us, in varying degrees, are fallible. It could be, as your correspondents would seem to believe, that I am more fallible than most, but I would bid them remember the annotation in a general work on bibliographies which some years ago charged that the large specialized bibliography of a very distinguished scholar in our field was so filled with errors that it should be used with caution. I have ever found that particular work both useful and valuable and have never failed to refer to it in terms of its virtues. The bibliographer is always vulnerable. His work can never be perfect, and a bit of diligence can always turn up all sorts of omissions of a greater or lesser sort depending on the interests and special outlook of any individual critic.

The foregoing is, of course, the critic's undeniable right. All of us are the better from time to time for a bit of comeuppance. I think, however, that an effort should be made to distinguish between errors of individual responsibility and those caused by editorial or other kinds of limitations – particularly before putting charges into print. Nor do I feel it too much to ask that when such correspondence is submitted for publication, the person referred to be given an opportunity to read it beforehand and perhaps even

answer it in the issue in which it appears. This practice would certainly do nothing to dampen the liveliness of the *Journal* and would, indeed, go far towards preserving the amenities of the profession.

Yours sincerely,

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