

## On the Relationship Between Research and Writing<sup>1</sup>

Doug Munro

I speak to you tonight as a fellow sufferer who has experienced the agonies of expressing myself in the written word. More specifically I speak as a historian and some of the issues of research and writing to be discussed are peculiar to my discipline. But I trust that much of what I say will have a wider applicability. Even if I refer to examples drawn from my own experience, they will be indicative of the sorts of problems that we all face when writing up the results of our research.

*Research* is the process of finding out, of gathering the relevant material whatever it is or wherever it may be. *Writing* - in the sense that we mean it tonight - is the often painful and wearisome act of reducing the material to coherent literary form for others to read and understand.

My message tonight is a very simple one and therefore my talk has a limited objective. There are any number of books on how to write essays and it is not my intention to compete with them (see especially Barzun and Graff 1992; Clanchy and Ballard 1991). My focus is the way in which research and writing are related aspects of the task of producing a finished manuscript and I shall suggest that the manner in which one proceeds with research can have a major bearing on the process of actual writing, either facilitating or hindering the latter process.

The first point to make is to repeat the well-known adage that research and writing involve quite different skills and temperaments, and that a good researcher is not necessarily an effective writer. We all know from trying experience how the enjoyment of research can give way to the onset of writer's block. The blank sheet of paper can, for the writer, hold all the

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a lecture presented at USP on 27 August 1992 to a Teaching and Learning Seminar organised by CELT. I am grateful to Roger Landbeck for the invitation to speak. In order to retain the flavour of the original lecture, I have not attempted to convert the spoken word into the written word, nor have I expanded the scope of the original address.

terrors experienced by the artist confronted by an empty canvas. To give one of the many statements to this effect:

Many historians who have a flair for working on primary sources, find the process of composition excruciatingly laborious and frustrating. The temptation is to continue amassing material so that the time of reckoning can be put off indefinitely (Tosh 1991:110).

Even a historian as prolific as G.R. Elton felt constrained to write that:

If historians thought that their labours involved nothing but research, they would lead easier lives. Honest and thorough research can be exhausting and tedious. But honest and thorough writing will certainly be those things, and the agony of forcing thought into order and pattern should not be despised (Elton 1967:88).

Much of the problem, to my mind, stems from the common perception that research and writing are separate and distinct. In an important sense, to be sure, some research is preparatory to writing because without research there would be nothing to write about. Historians have the old, and rather tired, adage: "No sources, no history".

This evening, however, I want to put the notion that research and writing are not sequential but rather that they complement one another. Once this is appreciated and acted upon, many of the difficulties involved in writing can be overcome or at least diminished to manageable proportions. E.H.Carr, the historian of revolutionary Russia, put it well when he referred to the "unconvincing and implausible" picture some people have that historians divide their work into "two sharply distinguishable phases and periods" - research *then* writing. The common perception, as Carr explains, is that the historian:

First ... spends a long preliminary period reading his [sic] sources and filling his notebooks with facts: then, when this is over, he puts away his sources, takes out his notebooks and writes his book from beginning to end (Carr 1964:28).

This is very much in the nature of undergraduate essay writing, the only difference being that this type of exercise all-too-often commences the night before the due date of submission - and it is unfortunate that student effort is usually driven by essay deadlines rather than the weekly preparation for tutorial discussions.<sup>2</sup> But serious historical work is unlikely to proceed in such a manner. Carr continues (1964:28)

For myself, as soon as I have got going on what I take to be the capital sources, the itch becomes too strong and I begin to write - not necessarily at the beginning, but somewhere, anywhere. Thereafter, reading and writing go on simultaneously. The writing is added to, subtracted from, re-shaped, cancelled, as I go on reading. The reading is guided, directed and made more fruitful by the writing: the more I write, the better I understand the significance and relevance of what I find.... I am convinced that, for any historian worth the name, the two processes of what economists call 'input' and 'output' go on simultaneously and are, in practice, parts of a single process<sup>3</sup>.

Carr, Elton and Tosh are well-published historians, and whatever the differences in outlook and approach between Elton and the other two, they say much the same thing on the relationship between writing and research. First, the relationship is a complementary one; second, that writing in a coherent, structured form is inherently difficult; and third, by implication, that only those who have attempted serious writing are likely to appreciate these difficulties.

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<sup>2</sup> The need to start work well in advance of deadlines is stressed by Pauk (1970: 25): "Time is the great equaliser, for time is truly democratic. We all receive the same amount of time every morning. No distinction is made between the genius and the plodder; the parsimonious and the profligate. None is withheld from the wastrel; none is added to the store of the provident."

<sup>3</sup> Since preparing the original lecture, I notice that this same passage has been referred to for the same reason, in a writer's guide to history (Fulwilder 1987: 56-57) and also in a writing guide for students generally (Taylor 1989: 5). Tamara Deutscher, who co-authored books with Carr during the last decade of his life, provides an insight into his abilities as a writer and historian - his addiction "to the minutiae of precision and accuracy", his "gift for getting straight to the point [which] enabled him to evaluate great masses of historical material very quickly", his "incredible ability to work on different parts of the book simultaneously", and his uncanny knack of being able to work whatever the distraction. (Deutscher 1983: 80-84)

On the question of difficulty, Tosh hits the nail on the head when he indicates that people often research more in order to write less. The more data that is amassed the greater the risk of being overwhelmed by the sheer extent of the detail and the unfortunate individual can get so entangled in source material that nothing gets written. The risk is clearly there. How often have we heard the lament that "The hardest part is getting started?" - to which I would add "The second hardest is to stop writing". So what I want to do for the rest of this talk is to suggest ways - drawn from my own experience - to go about research in order to facilitate the writing up of one's results.

I am convinced that part of the problem of writing lies in the way that many students go about their research. I'm not talking about such matters as consulting bibliographies and other finding aids, or compiling one's bibliography, or even methodically consulting the secondary literature or the documentary sources, important although these matters are. Instead, I am referring to the frequent failure to *process* one's findings, to *digest* them as one proceeds; and admittedly it is not easy to go over one's material at night after a solid day's work. I'm talking about indexing and tabulating your material as you go along. Quite simply, the retrieval of information is too critical to be left to chance, and the larger the research project the greater the chances of the material gathered getting out of hand and becoming unmanageable. Writing in itself is time-consuming enough; to be searching for particular pieces of information during the course of writing adds appreciably to the time and energy expended in what is already an exacting art.

This is not to deny that important, even crucial, ideas often occur to one quite unexpectedly during the course of writing. As the historian R.R. Palmer explains, this is often part and parcel of the actual process of writing:

In my experience, the most useful and specific general concepts... arise in the act of writing itself. I suspect that most of the work is done by the subconscious, and that moments of absent-mindedness, or even sleep, are not times of mental inaction. How else can one explain how an idea seems to jump or flash into the mind (Palmer 1970: 175).

This - or something like it - has been my experience too. Nonetheless, the need remains to physically organise one's research notes from the outset. As Barzun and Graff remind us, "no researcher, it goes without saying, should amass notes higgledy-piggledy on a variety of slips or notebook pages, leave them unkeyed, and then face the task of reducing chaos to order" (1992: 23).

There are numerous ways to keep one's material under control and there is no harm in developing good habits from the outset. Many undergraduate students are incredibly sloppy note-takers and their own worst enemies: they neglect to note down the full bibliographic details of their sources as a matter of course; they don't bother to indicate in the margin the page reference; instead of using headings and sub-headings, their notes tend to be an undifferentiated mass of jottings, which makes it difficult to locate a given piece of information; and to compound the difficulty, they often write on both sides of a page. Do the opposite to the scenario just described, and one's essay notes become serviceable, and the essay less burdensome to write.

In contrast to the old fashioned pen and paper routine of note taking, the word processor is coming into vogue - and although USP students are unlikely to have access to a laptop computer, an increasing number of researchers are resorting to one. Hard disks may crash and files that are not backed-up are at risk, but at least pieces of paper do not get mislaid or lost. Every researcher who uses a laptop for note taking will develop procedures best suited to his or her requirements, but again the retrieval of information is paramount. One technique for finding material is to enter symbols against a given subject area; the symbols can then be located via the search function.

But for larger research projects, say Postgraduate Diploma research papers or M.A. theses, the researcher is more likely to enter material onto cards. Some people swear by them. They put all their information, whether handwritten or photocopied, on cards; in the latter case the photocopied material is cut to the appropriate size and pasted onto a card. If handwritten, the usual procedure is to have one fact or item of information per card; to caption or title the top of each card, which is then duly and unfailingly referenced; and, importantly, to write only on one side of the card. The cards may be expensive to buy but they allow the researcher considerable flexibility in the sense that they can be organised according to subject matter, and even re-

ordered should the need arise. This is patently not the case if notebooks are used for note taking, which explains why so few researchers use them. Cards have other equally utilitarian uses. They can be spread out and shuffled around on a table top, and this can provide excellent signposting when it comes to writing: it is incredible to see a paper or a chapter take physical shape before one's very eyes through the arrangement and re-arrangement of cards on a table top. The use of cards has an added advantage: by shuffling them "into chronological order or whatever order he chooses ... [the historian] commences to re-create the past. Thus he masters and reconstructs the evidence, instead of letting the evidence, as arranged by previous writers, be his master" (Blainey 1954: 341-42). In this way the research is almost forced to build up, on the basis of a variety of sources, an argument that is essentially his/her own.

Cards do have their problems to be sure. They are expensive and metal card cabinets even more so (a shoe box is usually an adequate substitute). They are also prone to getting lost or misplaced if not returned to their cabinet or shoe box after use, and they are not easy to carry between home and library. But they have the virtue of flexibility and it is less likely that a research project will come unstuck if a well-ordered card system is methodically used, and if the data is processed as one proceeds. In other words, the actual process of writing is aided in quite specific ways by the techniques of accumulating data and being able to retrieve this information.

When writing a thesis on the history of Tuvalu, my research procedures were more cumbersome, although they worked well enough for me. Most of my sources were available on microfilm so I either took notes on A4 paper or got microfilm reader printouts. This material was then filed in spiral folders according to subject matter and the material was indexed on system cards. In my experience, it is difficult to begin indexing until a fair amount of material has been gathered. Only then do the subject categories reveal themselves, and it is better, or at least easier, to begin indexing material that can be readily quantified - such as population figures and church contributions.

Again, it is so necessary to index in ways that will assist the writing up. My own experience provides a case in point. Tuvalu consists of nine small islands, eight of which were permanently settled in the nineteenth century,

and each of which had its own distinct history. I realised this at an early stage of my research and I indexed my notes and printouts with this central fact in mind. In short, I had to ensure that I knew which island and to what year any given piece of information related, and so every single entry was prefaced by the identification of the year and island in question; and to save me the bother of referring back to my notes all the time, the briefest of descriptions or summaries was provided.

One problem was that the presentation of information would get out of temporal sequence. This occurred, say, when a particular missionary journal was missing from the archival series to which it belonged, and misplaced in another archival series where it was later discovered. That could not be helped, but another problem was entirely of my own making. I really ought to have known without needing to be told that you use cards of uniform size (except that the bibliography cards may be a smaller size). Instead, I used cards of different sizes and had to put up with all the inconvenience that this entailed - having to use card cabinets of different sizes, having to carry around cards of different sizes, having to remember which size to use depending on the occasion. In the same way, people who take notes on sheets of paper should always use the same page size, preferably A4. For similar reasons of practicality and convenience, it is also unwise to use cards of different colours on which to record different types of information.

I also tabulated the names of the traders and pastors who resided on each island, as well as visits by the missionary vessels and warships, and the visits of the Resident Commissioner. This was done on sheets of A3 paper (anything smaller would have been impractical), again according to year and island. The name of the island was catered for in the horizontal column, the years went down the page, and the details were entered in each box on an annual basis. So in any given year, I knew at a glance which trader and pastor was where; whenever a warship or the Resident Commissioner turned up and to what islands, and so on. It stands to reason that the actual writing-up will be so much easier if the material is at one's finger tips through indexing and tabulations. It is assuredly time-consuming, but the initial investment of time, for that is what it is, pays dividends. Nothing is more frustrating or wearying than being unable to find what you want - or forgetting that you had a particular piece of information to begin with.

I'd like to say something more about my thesis research. For the most part I was very methodical in the sense that I systematically worked my way through the relevant sets of documentary sources. My major sources were the records of: the London Missionary Society, the Western Pacific High Commission, the British Colonial Office, and the whaling logbooks that were microfilmed by the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau. I also consulted the relevant journals of Government Agents on Fiji labour recruiting vessels and selectively scanned newspapers. Since these records were available to me only on microform, the bulk of my library research involved sitting down in front of microfilm readers, pulling out contextual material as well as what was more directly relevant. Like virtually every other researcher, I tended to gather too much material until my topic was more clearly defined. Conversely, I was inclined in the early stages not to recognise that material relating to other island groups was relevant to my theme, and so a certain amount of backtracking through microfilms was necessary. This is an occupational hazard of historical research and I was fortunate not to suffer unduly as a result.

Be that as it may, the thrust of my research methods is clear enough: I would go methodically through one set of records after another, processing (i.e. indexing) them as I went along. But one also has to be on the alert for the unexpected find, and even go out of one's way to facilitate this. In the true spirit of serendipity, I am a great believer in browsing. Quite apart from being pleasant and relaxing in itself, it can bring unexpected windfalls - such as the discovery, whilst thumbing through the review columns of the *Australian Economic History Review*, of a book on the British East India Company which sounded relevant to my thesis work and which, on inspection, proved to be exactly that.

It is also important to follow up leads and to take "time out" to do this, as the following example might indicate. An offshoot of my thesis work is a book that I am presently writing with Michael Goldsmith on Elekana, the Cook Islander who played a prominent role in the introduction of Christianity to Tuvalu. In 1870-71, Elekana was in Australia with Rev. S. J. Whitmee of the London Missionary Society and on several occasions the two appeared together at church meetings. Some of these meetings were reported in newspapers, but with disappointing brevity. I was sure that somewhere there

existed a lengthy newspaper description of one of these gatherings of the faithful, and I eventually located it in the *Geelong Advertiser* of all places.

How did I stumble across what I was looking for in such an improbable source? It is a long story. My first inkling that Whitmee and Elekana were the star attractions of church meetings was provided by a letter by Whitmee in the South Sea Letters of the LMS. It simply said that he and Elekana had attended meetings at the Pitt Street Congregational Church and other such venues in Sydney. I consulted the *Sydney Morning Herald* for further information and found a brief and rather uninformative description. I then noticed in the newspaper's Shipping Intelligence columns that the missionary vessel *John Williams* was soon to depart for Tasmania so I consulted the *Hobart Mercury*, but again came up with little concrete information. The *Hobart Mercury*, however, did say that the *John Williams* was proceeding to Melbourne, so I checked the Melbourne newspapers. This time there were no reports of church meetings and I feared that the scent was growing cold. But I did note that the *John Williams* next port of call was Geelong; and - Eureka! - the detailed description that I suspected all along jumped before my eyes from the pages of the *Geelong Advertiser*. That report, moreover, cleared up a few ambiguities that were bothering Goldsmith and myself. In short, I followed the trail of the sources. Look hard enough and you'll often find what you want and in the process give yourself something to write about - or more to the point you won't have to break off writing in order to chase up details that should have been tracked down at a much earlier stage.

I'll give two further examples of conducting research in a way to facilitate writing up the results. The first concerns a paper that I co-authored on I-Kiribati plantation workers in Samoa. Since I was embarking on a new piece of research I had to make certain decisions about the way I would proceed: should I use cards or take notes on sheets of paper? I chose the latter, largely because the scope of the topic was sufficiently limited to enable all the notes I was likely to take to fit into a folder, and a folder is certainly easier to carry around than a box of cards.

As it happened, I took 195 pages of notes and as I progressed I partially followed E.H. Carr's dictum that research and writing are "parts of a single process". That is to say, if an idea or point of interpretation came to mind

during note taking, I would write down my thoughts in full at the foot of the page, taking care to identify these remarks as my own. I have always found that this helps because the ideas that crop up during the course of research are so easily forgotten and one is left with the nagging feeling that something really important is beyond recall. Alternatively, the thought in question might have been a hair-brained idea, but one is never to know if it gets forgotten. Re-reading my notes and the article, I am struck by the number of times these ideas, jotted down in haste, found their way in some form or other into the eventual publication.

It certainly made the writing of the article easier than it might otherwise have been. In many respects it was not an especially irksome piece to write, but one section towards the end caused a good deal of difficulty. The trouble was that the pace of events quickened and at the same time the story became rather complicated. I found myself getting bogged down, partly because I didn't have the course of events firmly enough fixed in my mind. I should have sorted that out before putting pen to paper. Whoever said, "how do I know what to write what I think, until I write about it?" was very much to the point in a negative sense: he didn't know what to write precisely because he hadn't thought about it beforehand. Nor did it help that I was having difficulty in locating amongst my 195 pages of notes the various pieces of information I happened to need to write up the troublesome section. The pages of notes were sequentially numbered so what I did was to index on cards the information that I needed. On the top right of each card I entered the page number in question; I then noted the bibliographic reference; and lastly I briefly summarised the data. It was then just a matter of arranging and re-arranging the cards on a table top until I had them in the correct order to guide my writing. Once the cards were in their proper sequence and the shape of what I wanted to write was laid out in front of me, the rest was plain sailing.

My final example involves an article that I wrote on I-Kiribati and Tuvaluan workers on Queensland sugar plantations in the 1890s. The potential problem was that the documentary records were scattered and the research was done off and on over a period of years. It is not easy to get a sense of temporal sequence when the information is being gathered piecemeal and in random chronological order. When I decided to write an article on the

subject, the first thing I did was to prepare a chronology on my word processor, which saved the trouble of doing it on cards. In this case, the date was entered on the left hand side of the page; a summary of events was spread across the rest of the page; and the source of information was entered directly beneath in a smaller font size. The chronology was progressively updated and a printout was by my side whilst I wrote. There was never any risk on this occasion that I would lose my way during the writing up.

A final word. Only those who haven't attempted a piece of serious writing could entertain the notion that putting pen to paper comes easily. Whether it be exposition, organisation and structure, or be it tone, or choice of word or phrase, writing is more often than not a stressful - or at the very least a demanding and arduous - activity, one that requires discipline, routine, and a pig-headed determination not to be unduly distracted. Even great writers, like Thomas Babington Macaulay (see Barzun and Graff 1992: 204-05; Clive 1989: 262), endured agonies as they struggled through successive drafts in an attempt to maintain their own high standards. It was no less so for Bertrand Russell, who spent a two year period of "intellectual deadlock" when writing *Principia Mathematica*.

Every morning I would sit down before a blank sheet of paper. Throughout the day, with a brief period for lunch, I would stare at the blank sheet of paper. Often when evening came it was still empty.... [I]t seemed quite likely that the whole of the rest of my life would be consumed in looking at a blank sheet of paper (Russell 1967: 151-52).

On a later occasion Russell experienced another case of writer's block. In desperation he called a stenographer, although he had no idea what to say to her. She arrived at his door step and suddenly all became clear, and "without a moment's hesitation" he dictated the entire book (Russell 1956: 195-96; Russell 1967: 210). Nothing, apparently, quite concentrates the mind as hanging at dawn or an impending deadline.

The other aspect of the discipline of writing is attitude of mind - that is to say, a sense of commitment, involvement and devotion that transcends all else. G.M. Trevelyan, who worked prodigiously hard, expressed in

unequivocal terms his passion for his work as a love affair beyond compare:

That which compels the historian to 'scorn delights and live laborious days' is the ardour of his own curiosity to know what really happened long ago in that land of mystery which we call the past. To peer into that magic mirror and see fresh figures there every day is a burning desire that consumes and satisfies him all his life, that carries him each morning, eager as a lover, to the library and muniment room. It haunts him like a passion of terrible potency... (quoted in Cannadine 1993: 196).

Eugene Genovese (1971: 8) expressed much the same sentiments more prosaically:

The writing of history cannot be done well by those who do not love their work, including the most ordinary and discretely dull portions of it. It cannot be done well by those who consider it a poor supplement for the more exciting vocation of street-fighting....

Macaulay, Russell, Trevelyan and Genovese are all accomplished and prolific writers. If they find writing difficult, mere mortals like ourselves are up against it. The moral of the story is that there is no quick fix. It should not have been necessary for Genovese to point out that research and writing demand "long, often exhausting hours every day" or that "being a good historian is full-time work" (1971: 7). But the inherent difficulties and stresses can be reduced to manageable dimensions once it is realised that research (in the wider meaning of the term) and writing (in all its facets) are linked by a continuous thread of endeavour. Research and writing are complementary activities in the very real sense that research should be conducted with the explicit view of facilitating the writing up of one's results.

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