



Article

Editing in Jamaica 1989–1998

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Abstract: Despite changes in technology that have improved both production and the final product, small local journals still have a low profile and struggle to obtain adequate copy, in terms of both quality and quantity. My experiences as editor of two small journals in Jamaica in the 1990s provided similar problems to those that are encountered by many editors today. Endeavour to persevere, but, if you are not appreciated, be prepared to resign in order to retain your own respect. There will always be more jobs for good editors.

Keywords: *Journal of the Geological Society of Jamaica*; *Contributions to Geology*, UWI, Mona; peer review; printing; conference volumes

1. Introduction

This is a personal reminiscence of a time shortly before the modern digital age of academic journal publication. It is an account of my time editing two journals of local interest and limited circulation in the outer fringes of academic publishing. Producing these journals constituted some of my first experiences of editing. Both journals appealed to limited audiences centred on the University of the West Indies (UWI) at Mona in Kingston, Jamaica. Elsewhere, I am certain many editors were operating under similar constraints. During the first period reported below, when I was editor of *Journal of the Geological Society of Jamaica (JGSJ)*, most of the submitted papers were typewritten, that is, in those dark ages before we all became connected to the World Wide Web by our electronic umbilical cords. Things were different, but not necessarily better or worse.

2. Journal of the Geological Society of Jamaica

The *JGSJ* evolved from *Geonotes*, the newsletter of the Jamaica area group of the Geologists' Association, based in London, England. The link between the Geologists' Association and Jamaica was Dr. Lawrence J. Chubb (1887–1971), formerly of University College London and, after his first "retirement", a member of the Geological Survey of Jamaica [1,2]. *Geonotes* was cyclostyled in the offices of the Survey. The first *Geonotes* was published in 1958 and produced four times per year. This high productivity I find extraordinary; 31 years later, I struggled to raise adequate copy for the annual issue of *JGSJ*. The explanation, in part, was that the 1950s was a peak in the activities of the Geological Survey of Jamaica under its dynamic director, Professor Verners A. Zans (1904–1961) [3], and much of *Geonotes* was written by the surveyors, most consistently by Chubb.

By the mid-1980s the centre of Jamaican geological studies had migrated a walking distance away to the Department of Geology at UWI, opened in the early 1960s. The editorship of *JGSJ* passed through a series of lecturers in what was always a small Department; there were only four teaching staff and a museum curator when I joined UWI in 1986. At that time, Trevor A. Jackson, the head of department, was producing his last issue as editor and was in the process of passing the reins on to Rafi Ahmad.

Rafi was editor 1986–1988 and made a number of welcome innovations that were also being made around the same time by many other small journals worldwide. He instigated external peer review for all submissions, whereas previously they had been considered, at most, up and down the corridor of the Department of Geology. Apart from improving the quality of published papers, this also had the effect of spreading the name of *JGSJ* a little more widely, at least among the reviewers. Rafi also moved *JGSJ* into the computer age and had it typeset externally on campus. The improvement in appearance was highly praiseworthy.

This improvement can be judged by considering the requirements for submission to the *JGSJ* before Rafi's editorship. Typescripts were submitted single spaced on foolscap paper for photo-reduction and publication at quarto page size. I submitted two papers for Rafi's first issue (volume 24, 1988). These were peer reviewed externally, and revised and retyped on foolscap, by me, with great care so that every page was a thing of beauty and eminently camera-ready. Only then did Rafi let me know that I had been largely wasting my time as all papers were henceforth to be word processed. I was not best pleased to have expended such care and time to no avail, but was mollified by the superior appearance of the proofs and, eventually, the published volume.

One of Rafi's other innovations with which I agreed initially, but that ultimately had little effect, was the instigation of an Editorial Advisory Board (EAB), all experts on Jamaican and Antillean geology, and based on the island and elsewhere. The list of board members (including me) appeared on the inside of the front cover, but what did most actually contribute? I quote Rafi's own words: "The Editorial Advisory Board . . . will not serve merely as a figurehead for the *Journal*, as is usually the case. The membership of this board will be performance-oriented and will be offered on a yearly basis to individuals who are prepared to whole-heartedly support the activities of the *GSJ*, especially in the area of publications, by advising and assisting the Editor on editorial matters. It is expected that board members will promote the *Journal of the Geological Society of Jamaica* as a medium of publication for scientific articles and secure subscriptions in the area of their influence" [4]. However, most board members did not write papers for *JGSJ* during Rafi's tenure as editor (I was an exception), nor did they encourage their students to do so. Thus, *JGSJ* was another line on the C.V. of members of the EAB that was obtained, by most, for contributing little or nothing. The EAB met its demise when I became editor.

The other problem area, apart from a lack of copy (see below), was the printer. Trevor Jackson, Rafi's forerunner as editor of *JGSJ*, summed it up thus when I became editor in 1989. A new editor should find a new printer, at least in Jamaica. The first year, and maybe the second, you will get great service as a new customer. However, after that the rot will set in. Whenever you telephone after another printing deadline has been missed, they will be ready with an entirely plausible excuse for why they have, once again, failed to print your journal, week after week. Rafi's last issue (volume 25 for 1988) was not finally printed until after I had taken over as editor in February 1989. Another three months of excuses while we waited for offprints took us to June and the end of my patience. I cancelled the order for offprints—the expression on the printer's face told me that such a precipitous, even impatient response was unwarranted—and paid the bill for volume 25. The next three issues received prompt service at the hands of a new printer.

So, I was editor for the next three years (1989–1991) and produced three volumes (26–28). Editing a minor journal like *JGSJ* was and, I am sure, still is hard work. During my tenure as editor I applied a policy of relentless encouragement to all and any who might be willing to supply me with copy. Anyone who ran a successful field meeting for the Society was encouraged to write a detailed report, a form of communication once much favoured by geologists, although less so today. I revived the book review section of the journal and published 18 reviews in my last two issues. I included what should have been a thematic set from a conference, "Flood rains and their effect on Jamaica", but only one paper was submitted and the rest appeared as abstracts only. I published too many of my own papers, at least some of which I would gladly have submitted elsewhere. These extras and the regular research papers gave each of my volumes an average pagination of over 60 pages, a satisfactory length.

I made no friends at the Society Annual General Meeting (AGM) every February whenever I reiterated that we needed more copy. Apparently, as editor, I was expected to be read and not heard. I would ask for more copy and one member of the audience, in particular, would tell me how to do my job. He suggested that I approach government departments with a geological interest (mainly mines, water and bauxite) and request them to include scientific publication as a criterion for promotion. What these departments would have said to such an approach from an amateur editor of the local geological journal, apart from get out, is anyone's guess. Needless to say, this was intelligence upon which I declined to act.

In truth, I lasted less than three years as editor of *JGSJ*, which in retrospect was long enough. I was hastened on my way by a new President of the Society with no editorial experience or appreciation of what I really required from the membership. Various innovations that I considered very minor seem to have been frowned upon by some members, although I'd had the support of the President for the first two years, ex-editor Trevor Jackson. For example, I had given the journal a sub-title of "A Journal of Caribbean Earth Science", which was really stating the obvious. I just did things I thought were constructive, rather than talking them to death at meetings of the Society's Council. The new President, having heard my pleas for more copy at successive AGMs, reached a management solution to my problem—he formed a new Jamaica-based EAB to keep me under control! This was done at a monthly council meeting where, unusually, I was absent because I was correcting the proofs of my next book. I only heard about this innovation several days later, in casual conversation with another member of the Society's Council. The President had gone behind my back without a true appreciation of what he was doing. After due consideration, I resigned; to the best of my knowledge, the new EAB never met. In truth, I was finding greater satisfaction editing books for a London-based publisher rather than running a local journal. But I did retain editorial control for *JGSJ* for that year. The volume was in an advance state of preparation, a number of my own papers and reviews were in press and, in the absence of an obvious successor, I had no intention of casting all my good work into limbo. I wanted those papers published, not languishing.

3. Contributions to Geology, UWI, Mona

My experiences of editing a small journal in Jamaica should have been over, but for Professor Ted Robinson's 60th birthday and Trevor Jackson's happy knack of spotting a good reason for having a celebration wrapped up in a conference. Ted was one of the original three lecturers in geology, and had returned after a spell in the oil industry and as a freelance consultant. Many of Ted's ex-students were now well established as geologists in the Caribbean region and beyond, and he had a deserved reputation as a meticulous worker who was (and still is) the leading expert on the island's geology. A conference to celebrate Ted's 60th birthday in October 1994 was an inspired idea. Trevor thrived on conference organization and fund-raising. Now, who might edit the conference volume? And there I was, standing right in the line of fire.

Not that I complained; I was an editor with a plan. I bought my first laptop in 1991 (UWI did not put a personal computer on everyone's desk until 1998, after I had resigned). I intended to produce formatted copy on my own desk. I also wanted to transform the look of the UWI abstract volume. Typically these were cyclostyled or (later) photocopied, and stapled together, creating a product that was unlikely to find a prominent pride of place on anyone's bookshelf after the meeting, forming the greyest of grey literature. I wanted to change this and so founded *Contributions to Geology UWI, Mona*.

From the start, I intended the *Contributions* to be a *bona fide* research journal, admittedly to be published irregularly, but whenever the Department held a conference. I obtained an International Standard Serial Number (ISSN), immediately elevating the *Contributions* above the level of the anonymous photocopied volumes. I invited Ted's friends in the sciences to write articles on his contribution to geology and Jamaica, none more welcome than Malcolm Telford's memoir on their student days together at the University of Birmingham [5]. The volume also contained a list of Ted's publications, and the conference abstracts (obviously) and programme. The printer did a fine job,

with glossy pages and a shiny card cover with a photograph of Ted at his office desk, pen in hand. The conference was well attended and the conference volume (that is, rather more than just an abstract volume) positively received.

During my tenure as editor we had a major conference every two years, a busy schedule for a small department; in retrospect, this was a golden age for geology in Jamaica, driven by Trevor Jackson's enthusiasm and leadership. The 1996 meeting was again the product of Trevor's feeling for anniversaries, in this case the 200th birthday of Henry Thomas De la Beche (1796–1855). De la Beche was the first geologist in Jamaica, albeit a British plantation owner. He visited the island to inspect his land and slaves for a year in the mid-1820s [6–9], and found time to produce the first geological map of eastern Jamaica—a remarkable achievement—and an accompanying explanatory memoir [10]. After emancipation and loss of his family fortune, he later instigated and rose to be the first Director of the Geological Survey of Great Britain [11]. Although a (benign?) slave owner, De la Beche's name is nonetheless revered on both sides of the Atlantic.

Thus, volume 2 of the *Contributions* was a celebration of De la Beche. In this we outshone the UK where there was no open meeting on the same theme. There were, again, invited papers about De la Beche in Jamaica and elsewhere, abstracts and programme, plus a field guide by Ted Robinson to some of De la Beche's more notable localities. That is, after a Saturday of talks, we went into the field on Sunday to tread in De la Beche's footsteps. A new printer produced a highly satisfactory product.

Volume 3 in 1998 was destined to be my swansong as editor of the *Contributions* as I was moving back to the UK to take up a new post in September, so I was pleased that the occasion was as big as it gets in Antillean geology. A Caribbean Geological Conference (CGC) is held at a selected venue within the region every three to four years. The 15th in 1998 was the first time that a CGC had been in Jamaica since 1962. Papers in the *Contributions* included four field guides, and general papers on Jamaican geology and research at UWI. As for the many conference abstracts, perhaps I should quote myself [12]:

“I have endeavoured to reproduce all abstracts exactly as they were submitted. However, as explained in the second circular for this conference, there is a strict word limit of 200 words per abstract. I have shortened longer contributions accordingly (the record was 324 words). I have also improved the use of English where necessary, corrected spellings and written a title for the one abstract submitted without one! I trust that the final product meets with your approval. Ms Sandra A. Muirhead is thanked for her help in typing those abstracts that arrived without a floppy disc.”

4. Discussion

Have my editorial adventures in the Third World towards the end of the last century any relevance to journal publication in 2016? I think so. Certainly, one thread that persists is the problem of generating sufficient copy of an adequate standard for local and other low profile academic journals [13,14]. The *JGSJ* is now the *Caribbean Journal of Earth Science (CJES)*, freely available online. It provides free Gold-route open access, so beloved by administrators, yet is not on the Science Citation Index and thus has a low profile amongst researchers (although there is a useful bibliography to earlier issues [15]). Writing in March 2016, the latest issue online is 2014, consisting of just three papers. Over the past ten years, only conference proceedings and thematic volumes have produced thick issues, and the editors remain regular contributors. Apart from moving from hard copy to electronic publication, nothing seems to have changed. Certainly, unlike many local journals associated with scientific societies, *CJES* has not entered into a collaborative agreement with a large professional publishing house—perhaps this is a possibility for the future? Yet, if *CJES* can ensure a quick turnaround of papers, colour and free open access, it may continue to be competitive in a market dominated by many journals of higher profile and impact, by publishing mainly local studies of broader relevance.

One feature that is notable about *Geonotes/JGSJ/CJES* is its longevity. The Jamaican publishing industry has had few scientific journals that have stayed the course and even less has thrived.

Societies have founded journals with optimism only for them to struggle or founder through lack of interest and copy. That *CJES* is still published is perhaps as good an indicator that, despite bad years, the journal is still wanted.

My experience with *JGSJ* taught me not to overstay my welcome at any journal, good advice for any editor. Editorial work requires time, commitment and concentration, not always understood by administrators with no editorial experience. It is better for an editor to resign from an unsatisfactory position than to linger where they are not wanted. As editors, we are often guilty when considering what is best for their journal without taking into account what is best for ourselves. If you are not appreciated, make an opening for someone else to try the hot seat. There will always be more jobs for good editors.

While I was writing this article, Professor Trevor A. Jackson died suddenly on 17 January 2016. Of all possible readers, it is Trevor who I most wanted to please. I present this article as a memorial to a good friend, a former Head of Department without peer and a patient editor who understood my frustrations when dealing with the pen-shy membership of a small scientific society.

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