Creating Narratives from Archives in Business History

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‘History is writing from one end to another’

In early 2012 I was deeply involved in writing a book that I had been researching for several years. The research had involved deep engagement with numerous archival sources. Now, I was barely with the sources at all. Instead I spent most days in front of the computer screen. A good friend, a business historian whom I admired and respected very much, both professionally and personally, suggested one day that ‘Of course, you’re just making it all up really.’ I was shocked, but brief reflection showed me how much truth there was in what she said. There was an important process of creation going on. Increasingly, I do not do my thinking before or even as I write but by and through writing.

We, and others, have noted that business historians generally have been reluctant to discuss their sources, methods, or research practices, or even to examine the status of the archive and its contents (see Kobrak and Schneider 2011, Decker 2012, Schwarzkopf 2012, Fellman and Popp, 2013). But business historians have undoubtedly paid even less attention to their practices as writers, despite the fact that it has been argued that there has, or should be, a narrative turn in business history (Hansen, 2012). Is this simply a null issue? It seems unlikely. For example, business historian Stephanie Decker has recently claimed that ‘the sense-making and storying of the historians begins in the archive, not in the construction of the narrative on the page,’ highlighting how business historians are engaged, at some point, in

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1 Riceour (2008: 138)

2 Recounted by one of the current authors.
constructing narratives (2012: 6). Work we carried out recently on business historians’ working practices demonstrated the considerable extent to which they begin a process of sense-making, of creating order, almost as soon as they enter the precinct of the archive (Fellman and Popp, 2013). They do so through repeated processes of orientation, mapping, and context-building. In this sense then, Decker is right. Moreover, through Decker’s words, we see straight away that the archive and the narrative ‘on the page’ are intimately entwined and are not to be easily separated. But her claim also has other important implications. First, it quietly elides storytelling with sense-making without exploring this proposition. Is storying always about sense-making and explanation? Second, the process that occurs between the archive and the narrative on the printed page is not opened up. Perhaps, it seems, it is not simply that the processes of storying and sense-making begin in the archive but that they are also largely concluded there. Some seem to believe the narrative is already contained within the archive. Archival studies scholar Eric Ketelaar, for example, repeatedly refers to the archive’s ‘tacit narratives of power and knowledge,’ ‘the tacit narratives of the archive,’ the ‘Numerous tacit narratives ... hidden in categorization, codification and labelling,’ and, again, ‘the tacit narratives of an archive’ (2001: 132, 133, 135, 137). Strikingly, Ketelaar always refers to the narratives contained within the archive as ‘tacit,’ suggesting that they are hidden, awaiting discovery by the exploring historian. They are given up by the archive, brought out of darkness into the light of day, by writing it down.

It is our contention that the status of business history as written text has not been examined sufficiently. Business history writing seems to be viewed as little more than a means of smoothly conveying the facts within a naturalized ‘found’ narrative coupled with a dispassionate exposition. Business history’s recent and encouraging simultaneous re-engagement with questions of both archives, sources, and methods, on the one hand, and narratives on the other will remain incomplete until we have gone on to examine what
happens when we leave the archive and return to the study. It is not possible to problematize the archive, by acknowledging its silences for example, and our encounter with it as historians without also problematizing the texts we go on to write. Does writing really resolve all the difficulties and ambiguities found in the archive and if so, then how? As yet, there is little to guide us.

Calls for a linguistic and narrative turn in business history have largely argued that we should make the narratives told by and about business institutions one of our central subjects; that these narratives, and thus also the institutions and events which figure in them, are socially and culturally constructed; that they are not merely representations but are constitutive; and that they meaningfully shape action and choice. Narratives have almost agential power; in Hansen’s words they can ‘themselves be viewed as actions’ and are thus ‘important analytical objects’ (2012: 709-710, 697). In sum, ‘Narratives are basic instruments for ordering reality, assigning causality, and by constructing meaning’ (Hansen, 2012: 696). Hansen, one of the most powerful advocates of a narrative turn in the discipline, goes on to say that 'Humans – whether modern historians or the people they study – make sense of the world by telling stories’ but this does not lead into a discussion of either the processes whereby we create our own narratives or the epistemological status of those creations (2012: 696). This is surprising for, after all, ‘When one can control the process of signification and what to focus on or leave out from a narrative, one is exercising power’ (Hansen, 2012: 698). Is this not what we do as historians?

Delahaye et. al. have explored corporate history as a genre, the concept evoking ‘recurrence of form and purpose in textual compositions and communications’ (2009: 28). For the authors, the genre of corporate history may have particularly strong implications for ‘the corporate quest for identity ... accountability or visibility,’ though they do also go on to note that the ‘interpretation of corporate history as a genre cannot be reduced to its function
for organizations’ (2009: 28). However, the authors are not really concerned with the type of writings most commonly produced by academic business historians, indeed they say that business history is ‘by no means the most interesting manifestation of the genre in cultural terms, whatever its relevance for the wider study of business or economic history’ but that, on the other hand, ‘the “thousands of more “popular” histories of firms” that business historians dismiss ... constitute an interesting, and hitherto neglected, cultural and organizational phenomenon. (Delahaye et al.: 32). Kobra and Schneider have also devoted attention to business history’s methods and sources (2011). Indeed, they seem significantly concerned with the idea of doing ‘good’ or ‘professional’ history (2011: 402, 401). They dedicate their paper to Gerald Feldman and his ‘commitment to the historian’s craft’ and ask the question as to ‘whether writing history is art or science’ (2011: 402) and throughout recur to the theme of ‘writing history,’ including its ‘basic principles;’ adherence to which, they believe, may provide a ‘feasible and intellectually rigorous solution to division in the discipline’ (2011: 404). Conversely, some scholars are gently condemned for being most interested in theory, ‘not writing history’ (2011: 407). But the criteria for ‘good history’ are rarely made explicit beyond demanding ‘rich sources,’ ‘poignant connections to contexts,’ ‘coherent and poignant stories’ (2011: 406, 407). This is interesting. Creating poignancy is a very literary effect that takes considerable skill as a writer. Ultimately, though, Kobra and Schneider settle on ‘good history’ being that which is ‘well researched and well organised’ – not that which is well written (2011: 411). In an even more robust defence of ‘traditional’ business history, Toms and Wilson assert that ‘the business historian is interested in discovering truth,’ achieved through ‘processes of verification, authentication and replication,’ contrasted against relativist positions timidly present ““just one of several equally valid stories”’ (2010: 111). The epistemological value of the story and storytelling – its relationship to truth (however understood) and knowledge – is subtly but unmistakeably diminished.
There seem to be two interlinked themes here then. First, where do our narratives (those we write as historians) come from and, in particular, how do they relate to the archive. In essence, are they found or made? Second, if we admit that we create them, as we believe we should, how do we create them and what is their value and status? How much does that value depend on their ‘writerliness,’ how much do or should we rely on literary effect, what exactly constitutes ‘good’ business history writing (clarity? power? poignancy?)? Finally, why have we not previously discussed the importance of writing to what we do as business historians Why do we not recognize the narratives we produce as being every bit as constructed (and thus open to ‘reading’ and deconstruction) as those historical narratives we study.

As with our earlier work on the archival practices of business historians (Fellman and Popp, 2013) we intend to begin our exploration of these questions in quite a practical way by talking to business historians about their writing practices. Questions to be explored will include:

- At what point – and how – does the narrative begin to take shape?
- Does the structure of the archive, for example the sequencing of records in chronological date order, impose narrative?
- As well as sequencing does the structuring of the archive tend to impose certain temporalities on the narrative, e.g. spans of time?
- Is the hierarchical ordering of the archive reflected in the importance given to different elements of the narrative?
- Does the archive ‘naturalize’ certain narratives but not others?
- How aware are business historians of existing narratives and contexts surrounding their object of study?
• What happens between the archive and writing? Do the historians know what they will write and how it will be structured before they begin writing? Or even before entering the archive?
• What is the relationship between determining the narrative and writing it?
• What for are the hallmarks of good historical writing? How do these questions relate to our perception of what is good history writing?
• Do the historian seek to persuade or to demonstrate? And to what extent are they conscious about it?

References

Toms, Steve and John Wilson, ‘In defence of business history: A reply to Taylor, Bell and Cooke,’ *Management & Organizational History* 5:1 (2010), 109-120.