

Stout Centre Review

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Publish or perish

As the end of the academic year approaches the usual scurry by staff to record their publications takes place so that the pages of each university's annual listings will be filled and individual departments can maintain a productive profile. 'What, nothing in this year's *Staff Publications and Theses*?', a prolific scholar may well ask of his seemingly lapsed colleagues. Yet what is 'publication' and why is it important?

Any editor of a journal engaged with the academic world will know full well how vital is a constant list of publications for young scholars starting their careers as well as for those in mid-stream. Promotion and recognition depend on publication. Scholarships and grants arrive in its wake. But sit at the editor's desk and peruse the stream of essays, papers and articles that assail him in the name of 'publication' and the heart must surely tremble. Articles on inconsequential subjects plague him. Grandiloquent expositions arrive that seem devoid of any other purpose than to impress.

Should the author have his or her essay returned with a polite note turning it down merely as 'unsuitable' when in reality it is an aspect of a much wider malaise? If this is done the manuscript will probably continue to make the rounds of other journals to burden other equally harassed editors. Or should the author be told the harsh truth? There is no easy answer: individual editors tend to take a course which suits their own personality.

With desk-top publishing gradually coming within the reach of all it may be timely to glance at the meaning of the words 'publication' and 'to publish'? Before the invention of printing a text that was read aloud to an audience was deemed to have been 'published'. Today it refers principally to a manuscript which has gone through the processes of printing and been publicly displayed for purchase. In other than literary fields different criteria apply. A musical work is deemed to have been 'published' when the score is printed but a manuscript symphony which may languish for a decade beforehand could be just as important even if it only appears in the composer's list of works. Is a recording a publication? It is now generally accepted as such as are performances of a particular work. For an artist an exhibition has the same status as a publication: most executants accept the fact that many of their finest works will never appear between the pages of a book. But what of a radio talk, which fulfils the pre-printing criteria by being read aloud to an audience. What happens to the script? Is it available to researchers before the death of the person who has delivered it? Or must it await the moment when its author decides to turn the spoken word into a book? The definition of 'publication' is constantly being extended: for instance a recent note in an Australian historical journal stressed the need to give this status to exhibitions based on serious research.

Such enhancements of the meaning of the word are to be welcomed. Evidence of achievement and ability can then assume a wider range. As more generous interpretations of the concept become accepted, the flood of obligatory essays, articles and expositions should slacken and to the great relief of editors, one day it might wondrously cease.

J.M. Thomson

Cover: Loki, a Scandinavian spirit of evil and mischief, by American guest artist Beth Beede. A mask using natural wools exhibited at the Academy of Fine Arts, Wellington, May, 1993.