

Preface:  
Being Edited by David Willis

RONALD BAYER

*The Milbank Quarterly*

DAVID WILLIS WAS EDITOR OF THE *MILBANK Quarterly* for almost 15 years. During that period he presided over a journal that was widely recognized for its excellence, the breadth of its concerns, and its multidisciplinary commitments. The modest number of subscribers belies the extent of its influence.

There may be circumstances where the kind of excellence that typified the *Quarterly* under David's leadership might be easily achieved: A flood of manuscripts from outstanding scientists and scholars confronts the editor with the task of efficient traffic management. The articles are received, dispatched to careful and intelligent reviewers whose evaluations determine the acceptability of a piece and the precise nature of the revisions required to turn it into a publishable article. The editor fiddles with a word here or there, but that is the extent of editorial involvement.

Things were different with the *Quarterly*. As a journal that sought to bring the full range of the social sciences and humanities to bear on issues of the relationship between health and society, it had to draw scholars from beyond the narrow confines of the many disciplinary publications that fill the academic landscape of America. Thus, its editor had a special challenge: to create an intellectual presence that would draw scholars from a wide range of disciplines. Encouraging au-

thors with well-established reputations to submit articles for consideration required a tireless search: attendance at professional meetings, phone calls to determine who was working on something new and interesting. David Willis was masterful, not only in such detective work, but also in urging potential contributors to pursue interesting ideas and new approaches to old problems. The targets of his encouragement and prodding, however, were not limited to established scholars; those who were as yet unpublished or who had just begun to make an intellectual mark found themselves recruited to the *Quarterly's* pages as well.

Relationships between editors and writers vary widely. Some are remote, others intimate. Some conform to bureaucratic norms, with the virtues and limitations of rule boundedness. Others are personalistic—with the promise of individual investment but the dangers of bias. There are editors who, because they are also writers, can empathize with the authors' struggles, needs, and desires. There are editors who do not or cannot write, but who nevertheless have a highly developed sense of what authors ought to do. David Willis's style was anything but bureaucratic. His relationship with authors was often intense. Over the years that I knew him, the only writing of his with which I became familiar could be found in his sometimes lengthy critiques of papers—some of these were so good that it seemed a shame that he would not undertake more extended efforts. There were also his introductions to special issues of the *Quarterly*, highlighting important themes and questions. It is possible that David's singleminded commitment to editing—his intimate relationships with the writing of others—simply did not leave time for the extended research that fresh writing requires. Whether David's insights as an editor might have been better applied to the service of writing is a matter for speculation. About his excellence as an editor there is no doubt.

Once a manuscript arrived on his desk, David gave it a careful reading. He thought too much of his able reviewers to waste their time with submissions that were not ready for evaluation. Of course he considered some manuscripts too awful to warrant such attention: they were too shallow, pedestrian, narrow, and small-minded, too much like a dozen articles that had already appeared. Sometimes authors who had published, not once but on several occasions, in the *Quarterly's* pages would find to their astonishment, and perhaps to their ultimate relief, that David would respond to a submission by saying, in his inimitable,

avuncular way, "This is not up to your own standards. I think it would be best if you took it back."

However, if there was the germ of an idea that needed more work, David would urge major revisions. Sometimes he suggested a fundamental restructuring of the argument. On other occasions the issue under discussion required a larger context. By letter, by phone, and sometimes in long conversations in his office, he would spur the writer on. One recently published author told me: "I know how to write. I don't need assistance along those lines. What Willis did was to edit my thinking!" What did she mean by that? David demanded intellectual rigor, conceptual clarity. He pressed authors to locate their analyses or arguments into the broadest intellectual context, be it in the tradition of eugenics for a paper on counseling women with HIV infection about reproductive choice, or the perspective of Tocqueville for a paper on the role of community-based organizations in providing services to persons with AIDS.

Had he applied those editorial skills to one field, that alone would have set David apart from the vast majority of journal editors. What was truly astonishing was his ability to enter into dialogue with authors who were demographers, historians, epidemiologists, cultural anthropologists, philosophers, economists, sociologists, and political scientists. This required a vast intellectual background, of course; but more, it required the ability to read in a way that can only be described as an art form.

It was not always a success from the author's point of view. David would press, the contributor would respond. Yet the result would not pass muster, and ultimately he would say, "This won't work." Rejections sting. No author likes them. They produce hurt feelings to a degree that cannot be understood by those who do not write. The experience can be as painful as the rejection of an amorous advance. David must have understood this because he never added insult to the injury of a no. He went to great lengths to avoid the embarrassment that too often accompanies such events, and he never sought to humiliate. In that way he stood apart from critics who seem to thrive on the opportunity to savage. A rejection from David Willis often was accompanied by encouragement to submit another manuscript at a future date. None of this should be confused with false tenderness. It was simply his way of being a tough, fair-minded, and decent professional.

If David believed that a manuscript was ready for review, he would carefully select readers who could judge its methodological soundness and factual accuracy, as well as its contribution to the field under inquiry. That in itself was no easy task; he would frequently spend hours in attempting to identify the appropriate reviewers. Sometimes he used three reviewers, sometimes four; if a manuscript was particularly controversial, he might increase even that number. In one recent case, almost a dozen reviewers were asked to comment on a single paper (an experience the author described as resembling nothing that he had ever experienced in his long and successful career).

Of course, there were occasions when, despite his belief that a paper was worthy of review, the outside readers would judge the manuscript to be unpublishable—and that was that. When they urged substantial revision, David, like many good editors, would have the task of assisting the author to negotiate the shoals of often conflicting advice. But there was more. His own comments would be contained in an often lengthy letter, in addition to a succession of flags attached to pages with queries and suggestions: What do you mean here? Haven't you already said this? Doesn't this need clarification? Haven't you contradicted yourself? Is the evidence sufficient to draw this conclusion? Isn't the evidence strong enough to draw a broader conclusion? When a revised manuscript was returned to David, the process might begin again. I recall the sinking sensation I felt upon tearing open an envelope to find a manuscript bedecked with those damned yellow flags, indicating once again that David, like *Oliver Twist*, wanted "more!"

On rare occasions, when David believed that a manuscript had much to say despite its structural problems, he would take on the task of virtually rewriting the piece, while remaining true to the author's point of view with which he might strongly disagree. Some authors, excellent in their own technical domain, simply could not present their findings in English that was acceptable to *Quarterly* readers. Here, especially if David was significantly knowledgeable in the field, he would rework the piece line by line.

This was not to everyone's liking. For some it was too overbearing, even intrusive. Some threw up their hands in frustration when they could not get David to understand that the paper was *theirs* and that what he wanted sounded like a paper that might have been his. For others all of this took too much time. In a period when fast-track publication is an understandable lure used by some journals to draw sub-

missions, the *Quarterly* was rarely fast track. This was the price for the artisanlike attention received by so many of the articles that ultimately were published.

Much of what an editor does is a function of what comes in over the transom. Despite David's efforts to cultivate potential authors, this was true of his work on the *Quarterly*. No matter how much he invested in the articles he published, there remained an undeniable fact: the impulse to shape issues confronting the health polity was largely beyond the scope of the editorial function.

To remedy this situation, to give fuller expression to his own sense of what needed in-depth and multidisciplinary analysis, David devoted enormous energy during the last years of his editorship to special supplements on AIDS, the oldest old, black America, and disability, among other topics. There he was able to make a distinctive contribution, typically with the assistance of very skillful coeditors. He methodically searched out authors, sought to shape their contributions, and, with his coeditors, applied himself to their papers with an editorial zeal that was even more intense than the norm represented by the peer review process.

Enconced in a dimly lit office, sitting at a table strewn with papers, piled with manuscripts and yellow pads, with—can it now be said?—an ashtray filled with the remains of cigarettes, David could be found performing his labor of love on the *Quarterly*. Old-fashioned in many ways, speaking in a clipped, inimitable, British manner, David had a special, almost quirky, charm. To some he adopted the stance of a Yiddish uncle, using the affectionate diminutives of that expressive language.

If the image of a traffic manager best describes the function of most editors today, David could more aptly be portrayed as a midwife. The readers of the *Quarterly*, but even more the 500-plus authors with whom he worked, came to know the value of his professional devotion.

Taken together, the contributions to this festschrift represent a collective expression of gratitude to an unusual man, who made a singular contribution by shaping one of America's outstanding journals devoted to the study of health and society. However, there is an irony here: David must read articles written to honor his years of editorship that almost certainly would have benefitted from his editorial attention.

---

*Address correspondence to:* Ronald Bayer, Ph.D., Interim Editor, *The Milbank Quarterly*, 1 East 75th Street, New York, NY 10021.