

Bob Biggs—An Appreciation[§]

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I first met Bob—Professor Robert D. Biggs—in 1974 when I was still a graduate student in Near Eastern Studies. My predecessor, Maggie Cutler, introduced me to him with the idea that I would take over as Bob's assistant on the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* after she left.

Initially the job was part-time, but by 1976 it had expanded into a full-time post. Now 31 years later—31 volumes later—in fact, some 126 issues later—we are still working together.

Many know Bob only as fellow-scholar and Oriental Institute colleague, but I would like to present my view of Bob in his role of editor of *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* (JNES).

The nineteenth-century thinker and writer Alexander Herzen spoke of the importance of maintaining the “eternally fluctuating balance.” This dialectic in some ways expresses the major problem facing an editor, who must deal with a never-ending struggle between content and form, acting or holding back, preserving something or changing it, and maintain the proper balance between these conflicting elements. How much should an editor alter in an article? If he changes too much, there is the danger of distorting the author's meaning. If he changes too little, the readers may in fact miss that meaning. Bob has grappled with this task—and guided me in my struggle with this problem—masterfully. He has seen his job as editor as the great responsibility it is and has understood the importance helping scholars have their articles published in the best possible form. The journal will exist for future generations of scholars forever, after all. Whether an article discussing a dig of mammoth proportions, the description of the tiniest newly discovered cuneiform tablet, or the latest version of the shortest verse of an ancient Egyptian poem—all are seen as equally important, and some of the subjects are often arcane, as readers of this journal well know. Bob has seen it as his primary job to help our authors speak not just to a handful of colleagues somewhere on the other side of the globe, but to be able to communicate with a wider group of specialists and the interested lay public that make up the JNES readership.

JNES is a specialized scholarly journal but at the same time fairly general in that it deals with several fields, a fact that presents a special set of considerations. The breadth of subjects dealt with in JNES is enormous, and Bob is extraordinarily well qualified to deal with many topics, not just those connected

[§] This is an edited version of a talk given by me as a tribute to Bob Biggs at his retirement reception in the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago on 4 June 2004.

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to his own academic specialty of Assyriology.

His early awareness of language began with his childhood interest in learning Danish, the language of his grandmother, and continued through high school and college with his study of Spanish, Russian, Latin, ancient Greek, and eventual concentration in French. A year on a fellowship in France, after graduating from college, was a turning point, allowing him not only to continue French, but also to study Classical history and art and to begin learning Biblical Hebrew, Classical Arabic, and Akkadian. As a graduate student back home in the United States, he continued these languages, adding ancient Egyptian and Ugaritic as well. Later on, he also became very involved in archaeology, working as the epigrapher on several digs in Iraq, and the time spent in the Near East sparked a life-long interest in textiles and carpets, leading to an expertise in this area as well. It is clear that Bob's academic background has made him superbly qualified to be the editor of JNES.

It is not only the vast breadth of his academic studies, and his excellent knowledge of the English language, however, that have made him ideally suited to this job. It is also something else. In part, I think, it is the teacher in him, but it is also his generosity of spirit. He has taken a personal interest in helping JNES authors and not only when dealing with the facts in an article. This he has done in his quiet way—and without the interference of ego. Whether it be encouraging an overzealous young author perhaps to tone down his excessive criticism of a more established scholar or the supplying of new material or suggestions to the older, more experienced, scholar, Bob is genuinely interested in helping our authors. Very importantly, however, he has also been acutely aware of the necessity of seeking the advice of another specialist when he does not know something, and all this with patience and politeness, always creating an atmosphere of collegiality and trust that has made it easier for the scholars—including the other specialists consulted—to respond to. Bob's ability not only to confirm what has been submitted by fellow scholars, but to be able to criticize and offer suggestions for change and improvement—always with the utmost care and consideration—are attributes that are particularly important for his job as editor.

Bob's personal integrity, his generosity in fulfilling his role, as well as his insistence on maintaining high scholarly standards have inspired and guided me over the years, and I never have ceased to be amazed by the time he takes and the sensitivity and respect he shows to all our contributors—and to me as well. I have been in a university setting all of my life, really, and Bob stands out as certainly one of the most special scholars of all.

A small quote from a letter recently received from a JNES author who wrote us after her article was in print supports this view:

“I would like to thank you both for your very professional editing. This is not a perfunctory praise. Standards have slipped considerably even at so-called distinguished journals since I began publishing some thirty years ago. JNES is a model of perfection—knowledgeable, attentive, sensible, and polite. I appreciate the time and energy you sacrifice from your own scholarship to assist others like

me with their publications.”

Before I close, I would like to add that we have also had our share of mishaps—mostly small ones, just in case I have given the impression that everything has always run perfectly smoothly. One that comes to mind occurred several years ago when the Printing Department of the University turned the figure of a Hebrew text in one of our articles upside down after we had made our last corrections—a pretty hair-raising development, to say the least! Fortunately we saw it just before it was too late, but the Printing Department was very unhappy when they had to insert 1,800 new pages—all the issues in our circulation—at their expense! Happily, though, the issue was saved. We, of course, have survived a few more editorial problems, but Bob has always taken the most philosophical and positive attitude about these things, putting the events in perspective and striving not to let it happen again, an attitude I have always found extraordinarily helpful.

To close, I would like to add that our relationship has gone beyond discussions of problems of publishing this or that scholarly subject and has expanded to a friendship that includes mutual family members.

Thank you, Bob. I look forward to working on several more issues with you before you leave your post as editor of JNES!