

## CURRENT TRENDS IN ACCOUNTING HISTORY

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper explores trends in accounting history in the immediate aftermath of what has been described as the "golden 1990s". Recent developments in the subjects of accounting history research are identified. Areas of declining and expanding research activity are discussed as well as changes within established themes and new areas of interest. Challenges confronting the accounting history research community, such as limited interdisciplinary engagement, the "Anglo-Saxon" hegemony and variations in the status of the craft in different nations, are also considered.*

### INTRODUCTION

The last few years have witnessed a number of significant developments in accounting history research. This paper seeks to document discernible shifts in the focus of research activity and changes in the institutional context in which it has been pursued. The study also discusses challenges facing the accounting history academy. The intention here is not to provide a comprehensive bibliography of particular contributions and contributors to the accounting history literature. This task has been accomplished in a number of reflective papers on the state of accounting history appearing in the years straddling the new millennium. The authors of those papers identified the achievements, opportunities and issues facing the practitioners of accounting history. In fact, one of the features of accounting history in the recent past has been an upsurge of articles reviewing the literature and analysing publishing patterns. Readers who are inspired to pursue research themes referred to in what follows are encouraged to consult the helpful annual bibliographies of accounting history publications published in *Accounting, Business & Financial History* (Anderson, 2002b, 2002c, 2003, 2004, 2005), *Accounting History* (Forman, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005) and the 'History in Print' section of *The Accounting Historians Notebook*.

With their natural tendency towards retrospection, and in contrast to their usual disinclination for making utterances before the dust has settled, accounting historians have already begun to look upon the 1990s as a glorious decade for their discipline. Carmona and Zan (2002) perceived this as 'a golden age' for accounting history research. Fleischman and Radcliffe (2005) have referred to 'the roaring nineties'. Those joyful years were undoubtedly a time of advance in accounting

history in several respects. *Accounting, Business & Financial History* (1990) and *Accounting History* (New Series, 1996) joined *The Accounting Historians Journal* (1974) as specialist journals in the field. There were special issues on accounting history in mainstream accounting journals and a significant volume of history papers in esteemed outlets such as *Abacus*; *Accounting, Organizations and Society*; *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* and *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*.

Further, the antiquarian and technicist approaches of some earlier generations of scholars were shadowed by the enlightenment of critical and "new" accounting history during the 1990s (Miller, Hopper and Laughlin, 1991; Carmona, Ezzamel and Gutiérrez, 2004; Napier, 2005). A rich dialogue between accounting historians working in different theoretical and methodological traditions ensued (Fleischman and Radcliffe, 2003, 2005). The 1990s also witnessed lively debates on the emergence of cost and management accounting which encouraged a discourse on economic rational, labour process and Foucauldian analyses of history. Interest in traditional subject areas such as the history of the profession, the emergence of double entry book-keeping and accounting regulation was reignited by deeper research, theorisation and contextualisation. New research themes were pursued and alternative historical methodologies employed.

Perhaps as significant a feature of the 1990s was the fact that, increasingly, accounting historians were accepted as having a legitimate presence in the modern business school. Research groups were formed and specialists built careers in accounting history. The growing community of scholars gathered at numerous conferences. In addition to the World Congress of Accounting Historians and the annual research conference of the Academy of Accounting Historians in the US, an annual conference at Cardiff Business School (later aligned to *Accounting, Business & Financial History*) was inaugurated in 1989. An international biennial conference associated with *Accounting History* commenced in 1999. Annual conferences on accounting and management history were inaugurated in France and the European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management (EIASM) convened periodic workshops on the history of accounting and management practice. Accounting history sessions also featured at national and international accounting conferences, particularly those focusing on interdisciplinary and critical perspectives on accounting.

However, as we shall see later, the halcyon 1990s and the advent of the new millennium were also marked by the revelation of communities of accounting historians who felt disenfranchised. There was also an awareness of the introverted nature of the craft, differential rates of advance and national variations in the status accorded to its practitioners. These themes are explored in subsequent sections of the paper. First we identify changes in the subjects of accounting history research since 2000.

## TRENDS IN SUBJECT MATTER

Perhaps the most oft-quoted taxonomical review of accounting history research is that authored by Previts, Parker and Coffman (1990). This identified the following

principal subject matter in accounting history: biographical studies of significant contributors to accounting theory and practice; histories of the institutions of accounting, such as professional organisations, firms and regulatory bodies; the development of accounting thought; general histories of accounting techniques and of accounting in particular nations; critical histories of accounting and its institutions; the preparation of taxonomies and bibliographies to facilitate historical research; and accounting historiography.

A few years later, Carnegie and Napier (1996) suggested a number of research directions and approaches which were contiguous with the themes articulated by Previts et al. (1990) but also emphasised the history of accounting in business organisations, histories of accounting in the public sector, comparative international accounting history, and the exploration of innovative research methods in history. In a review of historical papers (which comprise 20 per cent of the content of the journal) appearing in the first 30 years of *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, Napier (2005) identified the following principal themes of the "new accounting history": histories of accounting, power and knowledge; the professionalisation of accounting; and new understandings of accounting's roles in representing the economic, financial reporting and accounting theory.

#### *Areas of growth and decline*

In their review of the 'roaring nineties', Fleischman and Radcliffe (2005) identify 69 'major projects', defined as work which produced a minimum of three articles or books during that time. The authors singled out 'groups' of projects which featured large in the decade: accounting historiography and research methodology; the emergence and development of cost accounting and managerialism; professionalisation (particularly in the UK, US and Australasia); biographical studies (again, UK, US, Australasia); railway accounting (UK, US); and oral histories. Carnegie and Potter (2000) provide an analysis of the subject matter of articles in the three specialist accounting history journals, 1996–1999. They report that 30 per cent of papers represented institutional histories (primarily of the profession), 25 per cent were histories of accounting in businesses, 10 per cent concerned biographical studies and seven per cent related to historiography.

Edwards (2004) compared the subject matter of 626 accounting history publications contained in Bob Parker's bibliographies to 1980 with the subjects of the 467 items appearing in the annual lists of accounting history publications compiled for *Accounting, Business & Financial History*, 1998–2002. This analysis highlighted a number of shifts in research interests. Most notable was a dramatic decline in studies of accounting in pre-industrial contexts, such as the history of double entry book-keeping. Investigations of the history of financial accounting theory were also less common. Areas of expansion were more diffuse. Publications on the history of the following increased: the accountancy profession; cost and management accounting; corporate accounting and auditing; historical methodology; governmental accounting; and taxation. Anderson's (2002a) review of the articles published in *Accounting, Business & Financial History*, 1990–2000, revealed that while 21 per cent of articles concerned financial accounting, there had

been a decline in recent years. He also noted an increase in papers on cost and management accounting history and biographical studies.

#### *Shifts within established themes*

Since 2000 there have been shifts in traditional areas of enquiry, the emergence of new themes and calls to identify future directions.

Studies of cost and management accounting history were the focus of much debate during the 1990s. Calls for mutuality and the appearance of empirical studies revealing the scope for multiple interpretations have engendered a period of relative quiet in this field. However, the potential for research on this fundamental subject is far from exhausted. In addition to historical explorations of management accounting in the traditional sites of large-scale British and American industrial enterprises and the extent to which scientific management and costing was utilised in practice, research is uncovering diverse organisational experiences in other countries (particularly France and Spain, and to a lesser extent in Italy) and different sectors (such as retailing, craft-based industries, agriculture and the public sector). The latter reflects an increasing recognition in accounting history research that important insights can be gained from examining sites beyond the major enterprise, such as the small business, the household and the individual.

Interest in the relationship between accounting and capitalism has a long pedigree in accounting history, originating from writings by authorities such as Weber (1958) and Sombart (1915). In the last few years, several papers by Bryer (most recently, 2005) and Toms (2005) have discussed the role of accounting in the transition from feudalism to capitalism and its centrality to the capitalist mentality. This work, increasingly combining Marxist theorising with the contents of the archive, has the potential to ignite important debates among accounting and economic historians on the British agricultural and industrial revolutions.

Although a decline in pre-industrial accounting history has been discerned by students of publishing patterns, there is some indication that investigations of accounting in ancient civilizations have regenerated of late. New archaeological discoveries, the appearance of business and economic histories of ancient civilizations and recognition of the role of accounting in socio-religious and organisational practice have all proved inspirational in this respect. Accounting and accountability in a range of organizations have been studied in sites such as ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, China and India.

Studies of publication patterns also consistently identified the history of the accountancy profession as a growth area. In recent years, the stream of contributions to our knowledge of professionalisation in traditional sites, such as the UK, the US and Australia, has continued. Explorations of professionalisation projects and processes of inclusion and exclusion (on the basis of race and gender) have also featured in relation to other territories, particularly those experiencing radically changed political configurations under colonialism and post-colonialism, the end of the Cold War and the expansion of the European Union. Recent studies have examined professionalisation in countries such as France, Belgium, Nigeria, China and Portugal. A special section of *Accounting, Organizations and Society* on

'Studying Accountancy's Emergent Occupational Structures' in 2002 illustrated the insights to be gained from investigating professionalisation in different cultural contexts. Professionalisation has also been examined beyond national boundaries in the form of studies of imperialism and the international migration of accounting practitioners. There has also been a greater receptivity to studying the jurisdictional boundaries of professional work and, in the context of contemporary concerns, professional ethics and the globalisation of accounting firms.

Relatedly, studies of gender during the early 1990s tended to focus on the exclusion of women from the accounting profession. There is now increasing recognition of the importance of investigating the gendering of accounting beyond professional practice in multiple sites such as the commercial office, small firm and the household, and of the need to explore such themes in pre-industrial as well as industrial and post-industrial contexts. A special issue of *Accounting, Business & Financial History* on 'Women, Accounting and Finance' (eds. Maltby and Rutterford), scheduled for 2006, promises to expand further the research agenda on the performance of accounting and finance functions by women.

Biographical studies have traditionally related to significant figures in the accountancy profession and continue to do so. However, cursory investigations are being replaced by studies displaying greater empirical and methodological rigour. Biographies and collective biographies have tended to become more thematic, critical, employ oral history techniques and display greater contextualisation. Studies of migrant professionals, the role of individuals in professionalisation projects and instigating change in accounting practice have featured recently as well as studies of the contribution of accounting theorists and academics. It is also now recognised that biographical studies in accounting should encompass the notorious as well as the great.

Accounting historians have often found that modern day accounting and auditing scandals offer opportunities to reveal that previous catastrophes indicate the enduring nature of the issues confronting the profession and lessons from former disasters are seldom learned. The impact of such discontinuities on accounting change was explored in a special issue of *Accounting History* on 'Accounting and Crises' (ed. Walker) in 2000. The recent bout of "Enronitis" has encouraged renewed interest in previous episodes of accounting fraud, audit failure, fractured accountability and regulatory responses to the same. A special issue of *Accounting History* (ed. O'Connell) on 'Historical Perspectives on Accounting and Audit Failure in Corporate Collapse' was published in 2005. While on the subject of financial reporting and auditing, it is worth noting that recent studies have often tended to focus more on practices in large organisations and specific sectors. Accounting historians have paid particular attention to financial institutions (notably banks) and transport companies (especially the railways).

Taxation has traditionally fallen within the orbit of accounting history in the US. This has extended to the UK where the broader boundaries of 'new' accounting history and a focus on governance, public policy and the state reveal closer interfaces with accounting (Lamb, 2003). Recent studies of taxation in the accounting history literature have explored accounting, legal and socio-political

dimensions of taxation in the US and the UK in particular. However, periods and places investigated also range from ancient Egypt to eleventh century England and colonial West Africa.

Debates about accounting historiography featured large in accounting history during the 1990s. With the exception of discussion of the divergent nature of evidence, from the perspective of traditional and postmodernist historians, these issues have been less pervasive of late. This is a likely response to the calls for greater complementarity that emerged from the discourse (Funnell, 1996; Parker, 1997; Napier, 1998). Merino (1998) contended that there was no advantage in a debate seeking to identify a singular 'certified path to knowledge'. Indeed, she argued,

Accounting history will be enhanced if our community adopts the values – tolerance, willingness to listen, and respect for alternative views – that have enabled researchers in other disciplines to flourish. (p. 603)

Fleischman and Radcliffe (2003, p. 21) also called for 'a greater commitment to mutual learning and exchange' between divergent streams and Carmona et al. (2004) suggest coexistence between new and traditional accounting historians. These exhortations appear to have been heeded by notable accounting historians. Some economic rationalists have discovered the social, cultural and political contexts of accounting while theorists have noted the potency of combining paradigmatic insights with findings from the archive.

It has often been assumed that an impediment to accounting academics engaging in accounting history is limited awareness of historical methodology. Guides to accounting history research continue to be published with the object of assisting new entrants to the field (Fleischman, Radcliffe and Shoemaker, 2003; Walker, 2004). There have also been calls for a reassertion of narrative in writing history (Funnell, 1998; Parker, 1999). This is allied to the desirability of attracting wider audiences for accounting history research, and influencing agendas and policy making through communicating accounting history in more engaging ways (Edwards, 2004).

### *Relatively new ventures*

The growth of research on international accounting in the contemporary accounting academy partly inspired demands for an aligned excursus in 'comparative international accounting history'. In 1999, the Academy of Accounting Historians held a conference on this subject (see *The Accounting Historians Notebook*, 1999, No. 2, p. 37) and in 2002 there appeared a special issue on 'International Accounting History' in *Accounting and Business Research* (ed. Richardson). The foremost espousal of comparative international accounting history was by Carnegie and Napier (2002). The authors defined their subject as the 'transnational study of the advent, development and influence of accounting bodies, conventions, ideas, practices and rules' (p. 694), with a view to exploring their diffusion and identifying similarities and differences across nations. Recently,

comparative historical research has been published on accounting regulation and harmonisation. As with the expansion of international accounting, other growth areas in contemporary accounting research, such as corporate governance and social and environmental reporting, have also encouraged interest in the histories of such practices.

While investigation of accounting and the state in historical perspectives is not a new departure for accounting historians, certain research subjects within this broad area, such as accounting and auditing in central government and royal households, have been substantially unexplored until recently. The history of accounting and public policy was the subject of a special issue of the *Journal of Accounting and Public Policy* (ed. Graves and Radcliffe) in 2004. Particular attention has also focused on the military establishment. The implications of armed conflict, and total war in particular, for accounting change is a familiar theme, but scholars are also now recognising the role of accounting in the functioning of the military. Studies by Funnell (for example, 2005) have investigated the (mis)management of particular armed conflicts, and the accounting systems operated in the huge bureaucratic organisations of the army and navy where substantial amounts of public finance have traditionally been consumed. There is also continuing interest in the role of the military in the transfer of accounting technologies.

At the turn of the twenty-first century there were also calls for more social histories of accounting. At the First Accounting History International Conference, Melbourne, 1999, the current author called for 'Glimpses of Accounting in Social Institutions' such as households, workhouses, disciplinary institutions and hospitals. A special issue of *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* on 'Accounting at Home' (eds. Llewellyn and Walker) in 2000 contained some historical papers on the first mentioned of these sites. Parker (1999) encouraged social histories that reveal accounting in the everyday. Zan (2004) has also suggested greater investigation of the social contexts of accounting.

The role of accounting and accountants in the oppression of indigenous peoples has been a major focus of accounting history research in recent years. Studies have examined the functioning of accounting in the commoditisation, dehumanisation, dispossession, exploitation and destruction of populations such as the Navajo in the US, First Nations Peoples in Canada, Gaels in the Highlands of Scotland, Aboriginals in Australia and Maori in New Zealand. In 2000, a special issue of *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* explored 'Accounting and Indigenous Peoples' (eds. Gallhofer and Chew). Relatedly, there has been considerable interest in accounting and racism, particularly in the context of slavery, and on accounting and the operation of colonisation and imperialism. In 2004, a special issue on 'Accounting and Empire' (eds. Annisette and Neu) appeared in *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* and contained a number of historical contributions. A special issue of *Accounting History* is planned in 2007 (ed. Annisette) that explores 'International Perspectives on Race and Gender in Accountings Past'. Other authors reminded us that accounting potentially functions as an instrument of emancipation as well as repression (Gallhofer and Haslam, 2003).

Increasing interest in the intersections between accounting and religion in historical contexts not only reflects the potential importance of theology to the emergence of accounting and accountability concepts and practices but also the significance of religious organisations in economic and social life during the past. Studies to date have concerned Judeo-Christian churches, Buddhism and Islam. Historical insights featured in some of the contributions to a special issue of *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* in 2004 on 'Theological Perspectives on Accounting' (eds. McPhail, Gorringe and Gray). A special issue on 'Accounting and Religion in Historical Perspective' (eds. Carmona and Ezzamel) is planned to appear in *Accounting History* in 2006.

What is striking about the subject matter of accounting history research in the last five years is the extent to which it has broken further from the narrow study of accounting techniques, concepts and regulation. The continuing broadening of the research agenda represents the ongoing triumph of the "new" accounting history with its recognition that the history of accounting phenomena should be explored in their specific social, cultural and political contexts and by employing various methodologies. Contextualisation has almost become a *sine qua non* of submissions to accounting history journals.

#### *Interdisciplinary engagement*

The broadening scope of accounting history research means that its practitioners are increasingly venturing into the territories of other sub-disciplines of history. In addition to traditional intersections with business and economic history, it is evident from recent publications that accounting historians are connecting with social, political, architectural, agricultural, literary, military, transport, gender, theological, and art history. Although they increasingly interface with diverse disciplines, the extent to which accounting historians engage with the wider historical community appears to be limited.

Recent analyses of publishing patterns suggest that accounting historians have displayed a tendency to introspection. On the basis of their analysis of papers in the specialist accounting history journals, 1996-1999, Carnegie and Potter (2000) concluded that the accounting history community was 'insular'. In his review of papers appearing in *Accounting, Business & Financial History*, Anderson (2002a) identified a dearth of citations by accounting historians to material outside accounting and business journals. Carmona's (2003) analysis of knowledge transfer between accounting history and related disciplines showed that only seven per cent of citations in accounting history articles published between 1990 and 1999 were to papers in history journals. Carmona also indicates that accounting historians were decidedly "local" in their use of literature and primary sources. It is also apparent that many are disinclined to publish outside the journals of their own discipline despite the undoubtedly potential to contribute to the wider advance of historical knowledge.

The desirability of greater interdisciplinary engagement with historians was the motivation for the introduction of the "interfaces" section of *The Accounting Historians Journal* in 2001. Greater dialogue with historians is also desirable given

the increasingly diverse arenas in which accounting historians explore the implementation and operation of calculative techniques. These ventures require drawing on relevant sub-disciplines of history. Further, studies of publications in history journals indicate advancing interest among historians in the history of accounting. Historians and accounting historians have mutual interests in certain subjects and spatio-temporal settings. Historians have also researched accounting in sites which have received less attention from accounting historians, particularly in relation to accounting in agricultural economies, in pre-industrial rural societies, in various systems of governance and public administration, and in countries located outside the "Anglo-Saxon" world (Walker, 2005).

## TRENDS IN THE ACADEMY

### *The "Anglo-Saxon" Hegemony*

Parker observed early during the "roaring 1990s" that 'accounting history is increasingly dominated by writers in English discussing private-sector accounting in English-speaking countries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' (1993, p. 108). Accounting historians in European nations with rich traditions of scholarship, such as France, Italy, Portugal and Spain, encounter the problem that the principal accounting history journals are all English language based media. Authors in non-English speaking countries complain of the disadvantage of not only working in another language but also of review processes that are insensitive to continental traditions of historical research and writing. Carmona (2004, p. 7) has argued that

Patterns of dissemination in accounting history research result in a neglect of the majority of accounting history researchers who are affiliated with non-Anglo-Saxon institutions, conduct their research in non-Anglo-Saxon settings, and focus on observation periods other than 1850–1945.

Whereas Carnegie and Potter (2000) found that 85 per cent of authors of papers published in the three specialist accounting history journals from 1996 to 1999 were affiliated to "Anglo-Saxon" institutions and Anderson (2002a) discovered that 83 per cent of authors in *Accounting, Business & Financial History* (1990–2000) were thus located, Carmona's (2004) more comprehensive study of history papers published in a range of accounting journals for 1990–1999 revealed a figure of 91 per cent. While non-Anglo-Saxon scholars frequently present the results of their research at accounting history conferences, this seldom translates into publication outputs. Carmona urges greater communication, cooperation and tolerance on both sides to address this structural concern.

In addition to publication outputs, the "Anglo-Saxon" hegemony is reflected in the institutions of the craft. At the time of writing, the Academy of Accounting Historians had almost 700 individual and institutional members. Of these, 90 per cent were located in five countries: USA (71 per cent), Japan (six per cent), UK (six per cent), Australia (four per cent) and Canada (three per cent). It is apparent that European participation in the foremost international organisation of accounting historians is limited. In fact, only 12 per cent of the members of the Academy reside

in Europe, and representation from several nations in eastern, northern, central and southern Europe is non-existent. The specialist journals in accounting history are located in the US, UK and Australia. Eighty-two per cent of their editors and editorial boards are based in "Anglo-Saxon" countries. Studies of publication patterns indicate that authors tend to cite papers in these and other accounting journals with the same "Anglo-Saxon" locus and reveal the existence of a small number of groups of accounting historians in British universities who feature large in accounting history journals and produce the most influential work in the field (Carnegie and Potter, 2000; Anderson, 2002a; Carmona, 2003).

Neither is addressing the "Anglo-Saxon" hegemony merely a concern of scholars in southern Europe. Carmona and Zan (2002, p. 292) detect that much work is 'embedded in contexts characterized by a tiny space-time intersection' and call for the 'mapping of variety', greater plurality and receptivity to continental traditions of historical scholarship (also Zan, 1994, 2004). The absence of work on Central and Southern America, much of Asia and Africa is also evident from studies of publications (Carmona and Zan, 2002; Walker, 2005). Sy and Tinker (2005) have recently criticised the neglect of Africa as part of a more general assault on eurocentrism and archivalism in accounting history. Concern has also been expressed about the predominant focus of accounting historians with accounting in modernity, the industrial and post-industrial ages, and sites that inhabit the economic sphere. At the European Accounting Association Conference in 2003, a symposium was held to address the questions: 'Research fields of accounting history. Only business accounting? Why?'

#### *Responses to the "Anglo-Saxon" hegemony*

The US-centric character of the Academy of Accounting Historians is reflected in its governance. However, there are some signs of incremental progress towards greater internationality. From 2001 to 2005, the Academy's journal, *The Accounting Historians Journal*, was edited outside the US. There is an increased receptivity to appointing office bearers from other locations. The current president, Salvador Carmona, is the first holder of that position to be based in Europe and is to be succeeded by another from the same continent.

In recent years, the gatekeepers of the specialist accounting history journals have also been more receptive to submissions from scholars located outside the "Anglo-Saxon" world, though not, perhaps, to the extent that would satisfy those working in other traditions. A review of the articles published in the three specialist accounting history journals suggests an increased inclination by non-Anglo-Saxon authors to submit papers to these outlets. Whereas 85 per cent of papers published in the three specialist journals from 1996 to 1999 were authored by academics affiliated to "Anglo-Saxon" institutions, the proportion fell to 76 per cent in 2000-2004. Notably, over one-third of the papers published in *Accounting, Business & Financial History* during 2000-2004 were written by non-Anglo-Saxon authors, largely as a result of a series of country-based special issues. In 2001, special issues were devoted to 'Recent Research in Accounting, Business and Management History by French Authors' (eds. Boyns and Nikitin) and 'Studies in

Japanese Accounting History' (eds. Chiba and Cooke). In 2002, a number focused on 'Recent Research in Spanish Accounting History' (eds. Boyns and Carmona) and in 2003 'Accounting History: Chinese Contributions and Challenges' (eds. Lu and Aiken) appeared. Special issues are also in process relating to accounting history in Germany (ed. Evans), Italy (ed. Cinquini) and Ireland (ed. Ó hÓgartaigh; for Ireland see also Clarke, 2004 and Ó hÓgartaigh and Ó hÓgartaigh, 2004).

The quest for greater diversity and plurality in accounting history was also recently advanced by a special issue of the *European Accounting Review* in 2002 on 'Mapping Variety in the History of Accounting and Management Practices' (eds. Carmona and Zan). Napier (2005) has also observed that while historical papers appearing in *Accounting, Organizations and Society* continue to emanate predominantly from "Anglo-Saxon" scholars, during the last five years greater spatial diversity is evident.

Communities of accounting historians outside the "Anglo-Saxon" world have also promoted new publication vehicles for their research. The Società Italiana di Storia Della Ragioneria (SISR) (Italian Society of Accounting History) traces its origins to 1984 and boasts over 200 members. The Society promotes the study of the history of accounting and business economics, and organises national conferences and workshops. The first volume of its journal, the biannual *Contabilità e Cultura Aziendale*, appeared in 2001. In December 2004, the first issue of *De Computis: Revista Española de Historia de la Contabilidad* (Spanish Journal of Accounting History) was published (<http://www.decomputis.org>). This e-journal appears biannually, is free of charge and seeks to publish high quality, peer-reviewed contributions in Spanish and other major languages. Abstracts appear in Spanish and English. The appearance of *De Computis* was explained as a response by the Comisión de Historia de la Contabilidad (Accounting History Commission) to the need for a Spanish accounting history journal given the limited number of local publication outlets in a publish or perish environment. Further,

while some Spanish accounting history researchers do publish part of their work in English language journals, publication continues to be a difficult proposition for most. (<http://www.decomputis.org/presentacion/1purpose.htm>)

Contributors to the first two numbers of *De Computis* have written on French and Italian as well as Spanish subjects, and also addressed topics that transcend spatiality, such as traditional and new approaches to accounting history research.

#### *Differential esteem and rates of progress*

"Anglo-Saxon" accounting historians do not behave as a collective, amorphous, all-powerful axis proactively bent on domination of the craft. There are problems and divergent cultures within. Indeed, limited access to publication media is not only a concern among accounting historians working outside the "Anglo-Saxon" arena. In the US, scholars complain that the primacy of capital markets-based research renders the highest-ranked journals forbidden territory. In *Doing Accounting History*, Fleischman et al. (2003) portray the accounting historian in the US as a forlorn character who suffers discrimination and disesteem:

Accounting historians have had a hard road to travel in the US. For nearly two decades now, history articles have not been welcomed by journals of the perceived highest echelon. Lacking empirical bases, for the most part, history has received short shrift from the *Accounting Review*, the *Journal of Accounting Research*, and the *Journal of Accounting and Economics*... At many universities, accounting history studies must be supplemented by work of a more contemporary genre lest their authors be discriminated against in tenure and promotion decisions. (p. vii)

Not surprisingly, there are very few doctoral students in accounting history in the US and career building in the subject is difficult (Slocum and Sriram, 2001). Fleischman and Radcliffe (2005, p. 83) conclude that 'the field's prospects in the US seem to be diverging from the promising conditions seen in much of the rest of the world'. American colleagues are understandably envious of the manner in which accounting history in some countries is variously counted for research assessment purposes, receives official support, is the basis of the formation of specialist research units in business schools, may feature in curricula and is promoted by organizations of accounting academe and the profession.

In Britain, for example, concentrations of accounting historians have been at worst tolerated and at best encouraged in accounting departments and business schools. The subject features in some degree programmes. Personal chairs have been awarded in accounting and business history. Accounting historians received high praise in the Research Assessment Exercise of 2001. The Accounting and Finance Panel reported on 'bodies of excellent work in accounting history' while the Business and Management Studies Panel referred to accounting history as a field in which 'the UK has world-class researchers producing world class research' ([www.hero.ac.uk/rae/overview/docs/UoA43](http://www.hero.ac.uk/rae/overview/docs/UoA43) and [UoA44](http://www.hero.ac.uk/rae/overview/docs/UoA44)). The most recent *British Accounting Review Research Register* contains the names of over 60 accounting academics pursuing historical research.

## CONCLUSION

Fleischman and Radcliffe (2005) reflected that by the end of the 'roaring nineties' 'there were signs of rapprochement', an abating of the 'confrontational energy' which spurred accounting history during those exciting times. They expressed the earnest hope that the impetus of the 'golden' decade represented the beginnings of an international expansion of accounting history research. Carnegie and Napier (1996) concluded their paper on the present and future of accounting history research by suggesting that critical and interpretive accounting history, rooted in the archive and informed by theory, will 'continue to offer some of the most challenging and provocative contributions to our understanding of accounting as it enters the twenty-first century' (p. 31). A few years into the new millennium there is no reason to doubt the realisation of this prospect. There remain a number of major challenges and structural issues that the accounting history community needs to address, such as the exclusion of practitioners working within alternative traditions, differential rates of progress and esteem, lack of interdisciplinary engagement, and research themes conducted within narrow temporal and spatial

foci. There are hopeful signs that some of these issues are being addressed, albeit incrementally. Evidence also exists of the emergence of new research agendas and alternative ways of seeing which will further advance knowledge production and enrich historical debate.

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