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In their recent contribution to the Lauer Series in Rhetoric and Composition at Parlor Press, Brent Henze, Jack Selzer, and Wendy Sharer select 1977 as a watershed moment in the history of writing instruction at Penn State University Park. It was the year that “Penn Staters had devised . . . a rather different composition program, one that amounted to a sustained professional response to a challenging set of new circumstances” (134). By the fall of 1978, Jack Selzer and Betsy Brown were hired as track faculty and two lecturers—Marie Secor and Jeanne Fahnestock—were promoted from lecturer positions to tenure track lines. These four professors contributed to the transformative work begun by professors Wilma Ebbitt, Robert Worth Frank, and Douglas Park to professionalize and design a theoretically informed writing program at Penn State. To get us to this kairotic moment, Henze, Selzer and Sharer sketch out in three chapters of increasingly circumscribed snapshots: the cultural scene, the state of English studies, and the national conversation regarding composition instruction during the early to late 1970s. Although the ground tread in these chapters will be familiar to those who are students of the history of English studies and more specifically composition studies, it ought to be useful for those new to the field and its history.

In the first of their six chapters, Henze, Selzer and Sharer explicate and situate their historical approach as one that contributes to recent efforts in the history of composition studies to focus on more localized studies of writing programs. Such concentrated studies help to fill gaps in the historical record left by earlier, more broad based studies of writing instruction by the likes of Albert Kitzhaber, James Berlin, Robert Connors, and Sharon Crowley, to name but a few of the landmark historians. As the authors note, their “concentration on a specific time and
topography offers . . . an opportunity to give an unusually thick, inclusive and instructive
description of things in a way that fill[s] out [these] other histories” (7). To contextualize their
treatment of Penn State’s writing program in the 1970s, the authors pull back their lens and focus
more broadly first on the cultural scene.

The second chapter, “Background I,” offers a quick tour of the cultural scene of 1977,
replete with an ode to the death of the king, Elvis Presley, and a nod to Star Wars, Jimmy Carter,
and Open Admissions as hip and fresh, and the national economy as stagnant—a state not
dissimilar from today’s economic crisis. In their excursion, Henze, Selzer, and Sharer give stark
evidence about the state of education—how many students were enrolling in colleges and
universities, what kinds of students were enrolling, and what kinds of expectations students and
parents had for education that was increasing in cost and decreasing in state and national support.
Also included is a discussion of the pressures humanities was then under in the face of a
vocational turn in higher education. In response, Penn State in the spring of 1977 convened “a
faculty conference at University Park to ponder the future of ‘The College of Liberal Arts in the
1980s’” (17). This chapter paves the way for the next which tightens the focus onto the state of
English studies in the 1970s.

In the third chapter, “Background II,” Henze, Selzer, and Sharer review the shifting tides
in English studies nationally, a time when student enrollment in literary studies was experiencing
a sharp decline, and in creative writing and composition studies a marked upswing. In this
chapter, the authors also introduce the first of nine “sidebars,” brief reflections by luminaries in
composition studies: Hugh Burns, Janice Lauer, Stephen A. Bernhardt, Lester Faigley, Elaine
Maimon, Sharon Crowley, John Warnock, and Jasper Neel. The term “sidebars” is not entirely
precise since these reflections do not appear along the side or as bars. In fact, these appear below
the text in a similar font and style as the main body of the text, and are somewhat confusing because they occasionally repeat or anticipate the same points made by the authors in the main text. Moreover, the rationale for the selection of these particular composition stars, out of all possible stars then rising in the 1970s, is not clear. These technical and methodological quibbles aside, the reflections do offer interesting personal comments on major events and movements. Hugh Burns in this chapter, for example, recalls writing his rhetorical invention computer program TOPOI in 1977. To conclude their chapter on English Studies in 1977, the authors try to correct what might seem “an entirely negative portrait of the state of the Union, higher education, and English Studies” by noting the achievements of the space program, Rocky Balboa, and Alex Haley’s *Roots* (27). “Not for nothing,” they say, “was Debby Boone’s ‘You Light Up My Life’ the sunny and bright Song of the Year 1977” (27).

From English studies broadly conceived, the authors turn their attention to “Composition in 1977: The National Conversation” in the fourth chapter. Here Henze, Selzer, and Sharer rehearse commonplaces about current-traditional rhetoric, the rise of the process movement, the impact of linguistics, the emergence of basic writing, writing centers, WAC, the rise of technical and business writing, and the emergence of rhetoric and composition as a profession—an ambitious and somewhat curious list. These topics then serve as the focus of the eight remaining sidebars. Janice Lauer begins with “Rhetoric and the Process Movement,” and ends the chapter with “Rhetoric Seminar on Current Theories of Composition.” Stephen Bernhardt describes his journey toward composition when he entered the University of Michigan in 1977. Lester Faigley explores the connections then drawn between linguistics and composition while Elaine Maimon reflects on “The Birth of WAC.” Sharon Crowley and John Warnock in separate reflections talk about their experiences with the Wyoming Conference. Finally, Jasper Neel talks about his
experience at MLA in editing the 1978 collection *Options for the Teaching of English: Freshman Composition.*

Throughout Chapter 4, Henze, Selzer, and Sharer travel well-trod ground in composition history. Although the narrative is engaging and often enjoyable, it does not quite succeed in adding significantly to other broader histories of the field such as those previously mentioned. Even the sidebars, meant to tap interesting voices of those working in the field in 1977, fall short of opening genuinely new spaces for this history, the result of which is that they often feel superfluous and occasionally even disconnected. That said, the history in the early chapters provides a useful, if familiar, context for the final two chapters in which the authors really do offer significant and interesting contributions to the historical record in writing instruction.

In the fifth and sixth chapters, the authors narrow their lens to focus more fully on the material site of the English Department at Penn State and on the Penn State composition program respectively. These are lively chapter in which Henze, Selzer, and Sharer’s careful work in the archives along with formal and informal interviews contribute to a rich and interesting portrait of the department, its major players, and the dramatic changes in the composition program during the 1970s. Here English professors, writing directors, graduate students, and department secretaries lend their voices to the narrative to buttress the evidentiary strands uncovered in steering committee meeting minutes, departmental memos, general catalogs, student papers, and campus newspaper articles. Through these pages, the authors demonstrate that there is expertise to be uncovered in the ephemera and the memories of participants in any endeavor. Moreover, they embrace the inchoateness of the “competing voices” they hear. They write: “The history we tell is not seamless, nor is it a tidy tale of ‘good compositionists and those who oppress them’” (viii). It is a tale of many concerned parties negotiating their local, national, and disciplinary
identities to offer the best education they can, and Henze, Selzer, and Sharer do their best to present the ruptures rather than smoothing them over. Working through the multiple lenses and voices, they manage to thoughtfully situate Penn State in the terrain of composition history, noting where the particulars of their site offer important resonances and dissonances with the broader histories they channel in the early chapters and extending them in significant ways.

1977: A Cultural Moment in Composition joins a growing list of important scholarly books in the Lauer Series in Rhetoric and Composition, a series devoted to “publish[ing] scholarship that carries on Professor Lauer’s varied work in the history of written rhetoric, disciplinarity in composition studies, contemporary pedagogical theory, and written literacy theory and research”(ii). No doubt there is much Professor Lauer will recognize and value in this monograph and much students of the history of English studies and composition studies will learn by reading it.

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