

Harmless Drudgery: The Making of the *Tacitus Encyclopedia*

Samuel Johnson defined a lexicographer as “a writer of dictionaries, a harmless drudge, that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words.” This workshop affords a glimpse into the harmless drudgery that takes place behind the scenes in a large-scale research project and an opportunity to observe scholarship in the making. With the publication of numerous commentaries, translations, and monographs in the last fifteen years, we are experiencing a robust resurgence of interest in Tacitus not seen since the 17th century. In tandem with panels on Tacitus and Latin historiography, this congruent, meta-critical approach investigates the activities of contributors in order to clarify the traditionally vague processes which surrounds the production of scholarship.

Under contract with Wiley-Blackwell Press, the *Tacitus Encyclopedia* is the first comprehensive reference work to be published in English on Tacitus, one of our richest sources for the history of the early Roman empire. The planned two-volume set is designed to complement existing scholarship on Tacitus by providing readers of all levels an approachable means of access to the *Annals*, *Histories*, *Agricola*, *Germania*, and *Dialogue on Orators*. The project aims to give standard background information necessary for enhanced appreciation of the people, places, and topics fundamental to Tacitean studies. Entries offer in-depth treatment of the content and contexts of Tacitus’ history and reception from antiquity to the 21st century.

The *Tacitus Encyclopedia* is an international, multi-generational effort. There are 164 contributors from six continents representing 21 nations and 27 of the 50 United States. Contributors range in age from advanced undergraduates to emeriti professors, and include college and university faculty, graduate students, high school teachers, and independent scholars. In

August 2018, a group of ten contributors met at Victoria University Wellington; in November 2019, ten more will meet at the University of Genoa. This workshop will help maintain momentum for a project of this magnitude; more importantly, it can contribute to the field as a model for collaborative, international research. As an added bonus, there is much to be learned about Tacitus.

Tacitus names approximately 1,000 individuals (only 124 of them are women) and about 300 of these are known only from Tacitus. Because he was writing during the reign of Trajan, when the Roman Empire at its height stretched from Britain to Babylon, his works are also filled with the names of approximately 400 regions, cities, towns, geographical and topological features, and tribes of the peoples who inhabited the spaces the Romans conquered. The four contributors to the encyclopedia discuss their experience in composing entries of various lengths and topics.

Presenter 1 discusses how the identities of persons in Tacitus are ascertained before tracing their appearances in the works and the value judgements assigned to their actions. The combination of these two perspectives is the great strength of the encyclopedia, because it foregrounds the role that Tacitus played in constructing identities and serves as a reminder that history is inseparable from symbolic meanings.

Presenter 2, a contributor as well as a Specialist Librarian of Classics at a major research university, stands at the crossroads of the production and consumption of scholarship. As a vital resource working behind the scenes, this contributor can demystify the work of librarians from the point of view of an actively engaged patron.

Presenter 3 discusses how work on the *Tacitus Encyclopedia* impacted their teaching during the composition process and how they plan to use the *Encyclopedia* in future classes. Topics will include new approaches to social history via prosopography, ways in which entries can be

used to improve student writing, and how graduate student research might benefit from such collaborative projects.

Many contributors are tenure-track assistant professors who are under pressure to assemble dossiers for promotion. Presenter 4 argues that the impact of their contributions should be regarded as at least comparable to a chapter in an edited volume or companion. In terms of length, although each entry is between 300 and 1,000 words, the sum total can be as high as 7,000 words, that is, the average length of an article. In terms of content, entries derive from original research, and the encyclopedia is expected to have a wide circulation.

After the four presentations, the remaining 45 minutes of the workshop will be devoted to 30 minutes of small-group discussions facilitated by each presenter (audience members may join whichever small group they prefer), followed by a reconvening for a 15-minute presentation from our respondent. As co-editor of the *Virgil Encyclopedia* (Wiley-Blackwell 2014), our respondent is in a unique position not only to comment on the process and share best practices, but to reflect on the larger intellectual, social, and perhaps even political ramifications of a large-scale, comprehensive research project with a single focus.