



## Editorial

### *Gonzo History*

“Gonzo” describes a style of nonfiction in which authors abandon normal expectations of objectivity or distance and put themselves directly in their narratives. Both that style of writing and the term were popularized by the American writer and journalist Hunter S. Thompson, whose books and articles contained extravagantly detailed descriptions of himself, his experiences, and his judgments. In gonzo journalism, in fact, the personality of the author is central to the unfolding of the tale itself.

Historians tend to avoid any suggestion of personal bias or involvement and therefore rarely find cause to insert themselves into their narratives. An article in this issue shows how the technique can nevertheless be used to good effect. Truth to tell, in “Between the Lines: A First-Person Account of Berkeley’s Loss of Fermilab,” Catherine Westfall strikes far less flamboyant a pose than Thompson so often did. Furthermore, she inserts herself into the narrative for the purpose of illuminating what it is to be a historian. Westfall relates her experiences developing her historical account of Fermilab in ways that will surely resonate in many respects with historians of physics and also physicists themselves. Historians will recognize the value of her “snoopiness,” her love of unattended file cabinets, and her distrust of official narratives. They will sympathize with her uneasiness at the prospect of interviewing a stroke victim in the hospital—having to question in extremis an eminent, intimidating figure about a painful episode in his past—and with her desperation as she avoided a manic critic by fleeing to the ladies’ room.

By training and habit, historians generally adopt an objective mien. They tend to keep to themselves their own immediate feelings about subjects and events, rather than present those interactions for the scrutiny of their readers. But discussing those interactions can communicate to readers a clearer sense of how historical interpretations take shape. Westfall’s article, indeed, provides an instructive perspective on how the history of physics gets made. Physicists and historians have very different objects of study. Physicists are experts in the interrogation of nature through experiment and theory, whereas historians are experts in finding out how physicists practice their expertise by placing that understanding in a wider contextual frame. Thus, historians of physics have to act differently from physicists, and those differences are instructive when we can see how a working historian negotiates them with her physicist subjects.

In particular, historians of recent physics grapple with numerous social hurdles to gather data from subjects who are living and working and have their own perspectives of how the history they lived unfolded. Not least of these is the uneven power dynamic resultant when physicists are skeptical of having their stories told by someone else—especially by a non-physicist—or may think that it is already sufficiently told in the published literature. Westfall mentions some of the strategies historians have developed to elicit a story, such as cultivating trust, working through the natural guilt or ambition that comes with a long career, or delving into the professional and personal competition that is a natural part of any professional community. These social skills are as much a part of the historians' toolkit as digging through archives or assaying published literature. They bring to light the connection between physicists and their work, as well as the social dynamics that shape their professional lives, which these other sources might not illuminate.

That said, there are dangers to this approach. Historians never want to be accused of getting too close to their informants and thereby missing (or misrepresenting) the larger story. At the same time, even the most fair-minded telling of a tale can aggravate unhealed wounds and invite recriminations from those who feel their perspective has been poorly presented or their trust betrayed. Westfall's account of her personal interactions with Glenn Seaborg and Edwin McMillan highlights these dangers alongside the clear advantages of working closely with the subjects of one's historical research.

Historians of physics will recognize in Westfall's account both the swells and the riptides that run through the practice of recent history. Chances are, however, that they did not learn how to swim them in their formal graduate training. They certainly would have found little guidance from the literature. By including her own personal history, Westfall does a small part to expose critical features of the historian's craft that are too often left to be learned, at best, through informal mentorship, at worst, through a sink-or-swim moment early in a budding career.

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