

Editing the Newsletter

Twenty-one thousand lively-minded women generate an awful lot of written material. It flows through my letter-box almost weekly, greeted in the first months of preparing each Newsletter with glad welcome; then slight dismay as the pile increases and I realize that, again, there will have to be cuts to fit it all into the number of printed pages we can afford; mounting panic in the last two weeks before copy-date, when all possible space is bespoken and still copy pours in; rage as essential material continues to arrive after copy-date; on to trepidation after publication, as I await the first reaction to the finished product.

What comes in? On the whole, what you see, only more of it. There are always more contributions sent in for Group News than there is room for; either they must be shortened or some entirely omitted. We have an enormous number of ambitious poetesses in our midst; I could fill a quarter of each issue with the verse that is sent in. There is enough now in the files to supply me for the next two years, and then my successor, with all the poetry we could print.

Criteria of selection are difficult. Do I choose on grounds of aesthetic merit, relevance to NHR, originality, topicality, what I think you want to read? Should the Newsletter's aim be to entertain, inform, stimulate, present the image of what NHR tries to be? All these, of course; contributions which achieve any or all of these aims, especially if cogently written, are most acceptable. Originality is a bonus but not an essential; with new groups and members continually joining the readership, old important truths must be constantly reiterated, and the NHR image maintained and upheld rather than transformed. I hope the new feature, 'Soapbox', will provide stimulating, controversial, individual viewpoints for groups to react to and discuss.

Whom do editors like? – those who send in material in good time. Everything that comes in must be read, perhaps altered or shortened, given suitable headings, 'cast-off' – that is, the amount of printed space it will take, calculated. Then I must send a copy to the National Organizer, and perhaps to another National Group member particularly concerned in this instance, and await their comments. Around each copy-date, so much material comes in each item with apologies from the writer, who has been 'so busy'. I snort – it would have taken them no more time three weeks ago than it has on the eve of copy-date; and with three children, National Group and free-lance work, I too am busy. Twelve procrastinating writers' busy-nesses cause a totally frenetic state for me, while the printer waits and the GPO

does not help.

Then comes the real chop, reducing it to the allowed amount to take to the printer – determined by what the treasurer says we can afford to pay. Deciding whether to abbreviate articles further, or to omit something entirely. Writing again to some whose pieces were accepted weeks before, to say sorry, now they're out. After each issue goes to press, I have ten or so pages left ready for the next – or the one after that. Six months is a long time to hold something over – some indeed queue as long as two years. There are some pieces I long to print, but have to keep omitting.

Contributions are accepted in any form, even written; but you can make my life much easier. If articles come in typed, double-spaced, they can go to the printer in that form. If typed 56 characters to the line, I can see just how many printed lines they will make. With carbon copies, I can send one to the National Organizer, one to the printer, and retain one for reference, without having either to type it all again or put 5p per sheet in the public library photocopier. I don't want to put off brilliant contributors who don't type – just, please, send it early!

Our expenses for the Newsletter, unlike the rest of our annual turn-over, are zero-rated for VAT; so we cannot accept advertisements. We no longer include lists of speakers available; these are mostly of limited local relevance, and a matter for Local Organizers to follow up, so they now go in the circulars to LOs. We are deluged by requests from outside organizations for mentions, but can rarely spare the space.

I may have made it sound arduous, but in fact I love the job of editing, right through to the giant jig-saw all over our dining-room table when galley proofs are cut up and pasted into page form, and the final hope that one has produced a coherent whole. Reading the manuscripts, typing or amending them, correcting and arranging proofs, I get to know almost by heart each word of each article, and forget sometimes that nobody else does!

An egg is said to see a hen merely as the means to produce another egg. I must curb my tendency to see NHR solely as a Newsletter-generating organization. Fortunately there are ten other National Group members less besotted with this particular concern.

Hazel K. Bellin National Housewives Register
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