

Interview with an editor

Maeve O'Connor

Sometimes we are so caught up in the moment that we forget that all institutions have a past, both individual and collective. We forget what we owe to those pioneers whose hard work and vision laid the groundwork for the success of associations like EASE today.



Maeve O'Connor is a founding member of EASE and was present beginning in the late 1960s during each step of the various mergers (earth sciences, life sciences) that led eventually to the creation of the European Association of Science Editors as we know it today. She served from 1987 to 1997 as Secretary-Treasurer, then remained on the editorial board of the bulletin/journal until 2006. During these nearly four decades she witnessed the transformation of scientific publishing from print-based to electronic, accompanied and accelerated by the development of computers, word-processing, the internet, email and social media. In this interview Maeve provides a narrative history and comments in response to questions from Alison Clayson.

On the transition from school to editing

Though both my parents were doctors and I had chosen science subjects for the first year after School Certificate (an exam taken at 14-15 years of age in the 1940s), I switched to English and French for my final school year in 1946-7. Four years later I graduated in those two subjects at Trinity College, Dublin. I then took a secretarial course in London, after which my first permanent job was at the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine, where I worked for the anatomy, chemistry and pharmacology departments from 1953 to 1956. I soon found myself improving (or maybe not?) the wording of potential papers for medical journals by the professors and lecturers. I don't know whether they noticed my changes though.

After another year of secretarial work, this time for an electronics company, I applied for an editorial job at the Ciba Foundation [See box] in Portland Place, London, and was taken on in spite of my lack of a degree in science – and although there was already another editor there named O'Connor (Cecilia O'Connor, my mentor for the next two or three years). I worked at the Foundation for the next 30 years, first as an editorial assistant and later as senior editor.

On how Ciba agreed to hire someone without a science degree

The three years I spent at the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine must have had a lot to do with my being taken on at the Ciba Foundation. It was the director, Dr Gordon Wolstenhome, who interviewed me, not any of the Foundation's Trustees or the editorial staff at the time.

The Ciba Foundation fulfilled its aim of international

cooperation in science mainly by holding three-day meetings, mostly known as symposia, on a wide variety of subjects. There were also some one-day events called study groups. Attendance at both kinds of meeting was limited to around 25 scientists from several different disciplines and countries at a time. The two (or sometimes three) editorial staff took turns to make the proceedings of meetings ready for publication, smoothing out the English when necessary and checking the presentation of figures or references. The discussions recorded after each 25-minute presentation at meetings lasted about as long as the formal papers and most of the editorial work involved editing these discussions, with the resulting drafts posted to participants for their comments and corrections. Editors and participants also received proofs to check before the hardback books were published – first by J & A Churchill in London and later by Elsevier in Amsterdam.

Ciba Foundation: international cooperation in scientific research

The Ciba Foundation was set up after World War II by the Swiss pharmaceutical company CIBA, with the aim of promoting "international cooperation in medical, chemical, biological and pharmaceutical research". London had been chosen because English was then becoming recognised as the language of science and because English trust law meant that the Foundation had to function independently of CIBA, not somewhere for promoting the company's products. After a company merger in 1970 the Ciba Foundation became first the Ciba-Geigy Foundation and then, after a later company merger, the Novartis Foundation. This closed down in 2008.

On my first symposium and editing something I didn't understand

The first symposium I edited, very soon after starting the job in April 1957, was entitled *The Chemistry and Biology of Mucopolysaccharides*. Even after reading whatever the Foundation's library provided about mucopolysaccharides I was still fairly clueless about them.

However, a sound knowledge of grammar and syntax was enough, mostly. The editors at the Foundation could, if necessary, discuss formal papers with the authors during the meetings, or write to them afterwards about any problems with the recorded discussion sessions. As the meetings were mostly on quite different topics, with participants often from different disciplines, the lack of training in any particular branch of science wasn't necessarily a drawback for editors at the Ciba Foundation (though I might have been the only graduate there with a degree in literature rather than science).

The book of the meeting was duly published in January 1958, followed over the years by many more meetings and books on many different subjects, all tackled from a mixture of scientific angles.

On gender

The Foundation had Trustees, who were mostly distinguished

scientists, plus a small number of CIBA company representatives. There was also an Executive Council, some of whom were Trustees as well. Both groups were indeed all male. The editors and the rest of the staff met them only on social occasions. Gordon Wolstenholme, the Director for most of my 30 years at the Foundation, and the first few Assistant or Deputy Directors were men too but at least two of the later Assistant or Deputy Directors were women. The Director held in-house discussions of proposals for future meetings with other senior staff at which we could make our own proposals for possible meetings.

On editors getting together: Editerra, ELSE and EASE

In the 1960s I learnt that a European Association of Editors of Biological Periodicals (EAEBP) had been formed in 1967 and a European Association of Earth Science Editors (Editerra) in 1968. Cooperation between Editerra, its North American counterpart the Association of Earth Science Editors (AESE) and EAEBP had been discussed at Editerra's first general assembly in 1969.

I joined EAEBP soon after its first general assembly at the Royal Society, London, in 1970, after which members voted to change its name to European Life Science Editors (ELSE). ELSE and Editerra became closer when ELSE members started to receive Editerra's newsletter, *Earth Science Editing*, in 1976, the first issue having appeared in 1975. The publication's name was changed to *Earth & Life Science Editing* in 1977 when ELSE and Editerra became its joint publishers.

After a few more years of discussions about a merger the two European organisations agreed to do this under a new name, the European Association of Science Editors (EASE). The merger was formally approved at the joint fifth general assemblies of the two associations in Pau, France, in May 1982, with the organiser, Henri Oertli, being voted in as EASE's first president. The early history of the two associations was recorded by Gillian Page in *Earth & Life Science Editing* no. 18, 1983. John Glen's history of Editerra and its amalgamation with ELSE is on the EASE website (ease.org.uk/about-us/history-ease) and my short history of ELSE from 1975 to 2012 is online too (ease.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/origins_oconnor.pdf). For photographs from the early years of EASE and its predecessors see Reme Melero's collection at ease.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ease_30_years_-_part_i.pdf and ease.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ease_30_years_-_part_ii.pdf.

On evolving technology and publications: from mechanical typewriters to computers

Almost as soon as Editerra was born it had started work on what became the *Editerra Editors' Handbook*, with John Glen named as its editor in 1975. This changed its name to *Science Editors' Handbook* in 1990, with a second edition appearing in 2013.

Earlier, at ELSE's general assembly in Ustaoset, Norway in 1973, ELSE'S second president, Knut Faegri, had explained his plan for a manual on how to write scientific papers. Peter Woodford, my colleague at the Ciba Foundation at the time, had agreed to write this and somehow I became his co-author. The manual, *Writing Scientific Papers in*

English, was published by Elsevier in February 1975. Other books on editing and copy editing in science came later, still with ELSE's approval but unfortunately somewhat out of date once the world of electronics took over in publishing as well as everywhere else. Before that new world arrived, book and journal preparation had meant using noisy (non-electric) typewriters, with carbon paper or a tray of a kind of jelly used when extra copies of pages were needed.

Issue 4 of Editerra's twice-yearly *Earth Science Editing* became *Earth & Life Science Editing (E&LSE)* in 1977 and a joint Editerra/ELSE editorial board was formed. The newsletter was by then prepared on an electric typewriter and was published until issue 13 in 1981 by Brown's Information Service, London. For a short time after that, from issue 14 onwards, the Ciba Foundation became the producer of *E&LSE*. Those issues were typed by the Foundation's editorial department on a Diamond 5 word processor and my contribution was to learn how to use a light box (a wooden box with light bulbs inside and a glass cover for laying out columns of text) to prepare the pages for printing. Offset printing was done for a while by Imediaprint, with the 20-page issue no. 15 in 1982 costing GBP 223 to produce. By 1983 the production method included transferring word-processed contributions to audiocassette tapes, with the contents then typeset on a Linotron 202 typesetter before being pasted up for printing. The newsletter became a bulletin entitled *European Science Editing* in 1986 and began to appear four times a year.

New technology first came into action for the association at the second EASE general assembly and conference in May 1985 at Holmenkollen, outside Oslo. A conference newsletter edited by "Jennifer" was produced using Norsk Data's Nortext-100. This example, with newer production methods each time, became traditional at later assemblies.

On travels as an editor

During my time at the Ciba Foundation a number of symposia were held abroad – in France, Turkey, Egypt and Ethiopia, amongst other countries, and in 1963 I went to India on loan to the CIBA company to edit presentations at the opening of their new research laboratory outside Bombay. There were also many meetings of ELSE/EASE in various European cities to enjoy. EASE's counterpart in North America, the Council of Biology Editors (now the Council of Science Editors), and the new International Federation of Scientific Editors' Associations (IFSEA, later IFSE, now defunct), provided more places to visit and people to meet in the USA, Canada and Israel.

On behalf of UNESCO I taught a course on scientific writing to students in Bogor, Indonesia, in 1983. That course also allowed me a lightning visit to Bali and a slightly longer one to Australia.

On the challenges of teaching writing and editing

I'm not sure that I ever properly learnt how to teach how to write scientific papers. Some such writing just involves writing good, or at least clear and reasonably correct, English, so not being a scientist wasn't a problem for me. The nine-day course in Indonesia, my first such effort,

taught me that students need written words as well as spoken. In Bogor I had to construct a book on the spot, which meant spending the first few evenings there with a borrowed typewriter and handing the resulting pages over to be copied every morning before the class started. There was no time to be scared. The students were from Thailand and the Philippines as well as Indonesia, but luckily they all seemed quite proficient in English.

After I retired from work at the Ciba Foundation I gave just two or three other courses in writing scientific papers for scientists from various disciplines, one in Rome jointly with CBE member Frances Porcher, and a couple in Venice. In Venice one course took place on the island of Servolo, a former home for the mentally challenged. There the sun shone and there was a pleasant boat trip every morning and evening, with some teaching and writing in between.

On adjusting to new responsibilities and changing technologies

I retired from the Ciba Foundation in April 1987 but actual retirement didn't happen for many years. In succession to Nancy Morris and Nadia Slow I became Secretary-Treasurer of EASE and Secretary of EASE's Editorial Board. By this time EASE had joined the electronic world by buying its first computer, an Amstrad PC-1512, so I also became production manager for the bulletin, using word processor software to prepare it on floppy disks. Editorial board member Hugh de Glanville then used a laser printer to produce camera-ready pages that the publishers transferred to their hard disks for on-screen make-up.

EASE acquired its first email address in 1994 and camera-ready copy for the bulletin began to be sent to Chameleon Press for production on its 1200 dots per inch printer, replacing the 300 dots per inch version that had been produced on a laser printer. Production methods (and the bulletin's printer) then started to change quite often. EASE made its first appearance on the world-wide web in November 1995, via CIX at www.compulink.co.uk/~ease-eurscieditors (pages no longer available there), progressing eventually to the current address.

Jenny Gretton took over as Secretary of EASE in 1997 but I stayed on the Editorial Board until 2006, after the Ninth General Assembly and Conference in Krakow in June that year. Real retirement happened then for me – but as an

honorary member of EASE I still receive *European Science Editing* and read it with interest, remembering the many opportunities to visit new places, or favourite older ones, for meetings with old friends or new. Among the events that stand out in my memory are two assemblies in Norway – the early one at Ustaoset and a later one at Holmenkollen. Then there was the amalgamation in Pau, the dinner at Amboise that Herve Maisonneuve organised for the meeting in Tours, and the last meeting I attended, in Krakow – but there were many others just as enjoyable.

On her debt to books and reading

My editorial skills, such as they were, probably came from always having been a reader, though not always reading the best books. Whoever taught English at the convent school I survived for six wartime years (and a couple more when peace arrived) must also have helped along the way. And the previous occupant of my medical parents' home back then had left us to look after a splendid library in the surgery, with books ranging from classic adventure novels for boys to *The Ettrick Shepherd* by James Hogg and similar volumes for older readers. Studying French and English literature at TCD must have helped too, though the emphasis was on literature in general, not grammar.

On looking back at EASE

The 1973 meeting of ELSE in Ustaoset was the first such event I had been to outside London. There was still snow on the mountains beyond the village and sheep grazed close to the hotel windows. The high cost of beer or any other alcohol was the only thing not to like. The sun shone in both Ustaoset and Holmenkollen and we could sit or walk outside in free or even some working time. Reme Melero's photos show what these two meetings and many others were like, socially as well as in working mode.

I found the meetings of the European Association of Science Editors and older counterparts in North America, CBE and AESE (Council of Biology Editors and the Association of Earth Science Editors), were stimulating and informative events, as well as providing welcome opportunities to meet new people and see new places. Such meetings certainly made a change from sitting at a desk checking grammar, spelling and higher matters!