

Getting it wrong: has near enough become good enough?

The faintest of all human passions is the love of truth.

Robert Nichols

A E Housman

It is standard practice that when books are published they come with a disclaimer in which the author thanks all those who have helped with reading and checking the manuscript but absolves them of all responsibility for any remaining errors.

But imagine an author—a philosopher, for reasons which will soon become apparent—who labours on his *magnum opus* over a great many years. So assiduously has he checked and re-checked every statement in his book that he is emboldened to declare in his preface, ‘I am proud to say no errors remain in the book.’ He then endures a sleepless night. Being a philosopher, he has pondered the likely truth-value of his claim, and its implications. True enough, he thinks, I have taken every precaution to avoid error, but surely it is logically possible that I have let one slip through. He decides the only truly safe course is to amend his preface: ‘There is at least one error in the book, for which I am truly sorry.’ There, he thinks to himself, now I am covered. But, as luck would have it, he had been right the first time: there had in fact been no errors in his book—though of course there is one now.

It seems a perfectly reasonable claim to make that there will inevitably be errors in a book, and yet making it has led our author into the very error he wished to avoid. Needless to say, of course, errors of this sort are readily forgivable. And doubtless most authors—and their readers—would be more than willing to accept such a mild and relatively arcane example of error.

But what about the following gaff? In one of his books, the distinguished science writer Michael Shermer quotes the following lines:

*In vain the sage, with retrospective eye,
Would from th’ apparent what conclude the why,
Infer the motive from the deed, and show
That what we chanced was what we meant to do.*

This he attributes to the ‘*Essay on Man*’ by the ‘nineteenth-century English poet and essayist Alexander Pope’ (Shermer 2001, 80).



About the author

Robert Nichols is Senior Editor at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. He has edited more than 20 non-fiction books and more than 60 major exhibitions for a variety of museums and galleries. A former teacher and university lecturer, he has a PhD in Philosophy. When not working he will typically be found reading, playing chess or correcting restaurant menus.



Clearly, there are problems with this: first, ‘nineteenth-century’ is obviously incorrect for someone who was born in 1688 and died in 1744; second, no one describes Pope as an ‘essayist’—I suspect Shermer has been led astray by the title Pope gave to some of his most famous poems; third, these lines are not from ‘An essay on man’ at all, but rather from the ‘Epistle to Sir Richard Temple, Lord Cobham’.¹

How is it possible to get such well-known—and readily verifiable—facts so wrong? It is important to add that Shermer is generally quite reliable in matters of fact and argument, so his slip, although surprising, is unlikely to make us overly suspicious of the other claims in his book. Similarly, in Stephen Greenblatt’s *The swerve*, a study of the rediscovery of Lucretius’ poem *De rerum natura*, Ptolemy is consistently misspelled as ‘Ptolomey’ (‘Ptolomaic’ is also used).² But Greenblatt is generally a very careful scholar, so we are willing to forgive slight lapses.

Errors in books, articles, exhibition text and other forms of publication can take many forms, from the slightest, most forgivable typo to matters of deep misinterpretation. What I will most be concerned with in this paper are what I call Readily Avoidable Errors—the type of error we are most surprised to encounter, simply because we feel it must surely have been so easy to avoid. Such errors lead us to exclaim, ‘How could they possibly have got that wrong?’

But perhaps we should not be surprised to see so many Readily Avoidable Errors popping up nowadays.³ A former colleague, himself a prolific author, often chided his fellow historians for the time they took to produce their books and articles: ‘Don’t get it right, get it written,’ he would exclaim. For my part, I would rather see fewer but better books. Sadly, some authors just are careless, and I suspect that some—though thankfully not all—publishers, with an eye on the bottom line, are inclined, wherever possible, to cut corners when it comes to editing, proofing and fact-checking.

Mere typos

There have, of course, always been errors in publications, and typographical errors make up a large portion of them. As more than one person has observed, typos are the one thing certain to survive a nuclear holocaust. Sometimes these are wonderfully entertaining. My favourite all-time typo dates from 2005, the year an American publisher brought out—for reasons never entirely obvious to me—an illustrated version of William Strunk Jr and E B White’s *The elements of style*. The book reproduced as an appendix Strunk’s preface from the first edition. The opening sentence reads: ‘This book aims to give in brief space the principle [*sic*] requirements of plain English style’ (Strunk & White 2005, 147). Had he still been around, would Strunk have appreciated the irony of this confusion of ‘principle’ and ‘principal’? Perhaps he would have been sanguine about the slip, mildly observing that much can always go wrong between pen and print, and any author is always at the mercy of forces beyond his control. I doubt it, though. I think he would have been appalled. Another ironic favourite of mine is the second edition of a book that included a list of errata but spelled it ‘erata’.⁴

Of course, publishing is a business with the usual constraints of time and money, and authors often plead in vain to be allowed to correct the errors that slipped through the first time round. You might think, however, that when a book proves relatively successful, some allowance

1 Butt 1963, 551. A minor point: most standard editions use initial caps for ‘Sage,’ ‘What’ and ‘Why.’

2 See, for example, Greenblatt 2011, 87, 88 and the index entries on 353.

3 Subjectively, it feels as if such slips are becoming more common. But anecdotal evidence is notoriously unreliable, and it is hard to imagine what a more rigorous study might even look like.

4 Some recent mishaps are particularly embarrassing. In 2008 the Chilean government issued a new 10-peso coin on the face of which the country’s name was misspelled as ‘Chiie’. Surprisingly, thousands of the coins circulated for almost two years before anyone noticed. And on the cover of the 2012 commencement program for the Lyndon B. Jonson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin, ‘Public’ had become ‘Pubic’. That time, everyone noticed.



might be made. And yet many often reprinted books continue to have uncorrected typos: Michael Innes (in reality, Oxford don JIM Stewart) was one of the most popular mystery writers of all time, and must have earned his publisher huge sums over his long life. Yet successive Penguin impressions of one of his most famous novels, *Hamlet, revenge* (1961), have contained a great many typos: ‘gymnastics’ (25), ‘immobilized’ (95), ‘cruicial’ (97), to mention just three. Usually these things cause no problems—and may even increase the value of a famous book for dealers and collectors.⁵ But sometimes they undermine the book’s usefulness: the first scholarly reviews of an important posthumous collection of the papers on Presocratic philosophy of Gregory Vlastos, edited by one of the foremost scholars in the field, noted a great many typos and errors, some trivial, some serious. My copy is listed as ‘Third printing, and first paperback printing’, but inspection reveals that none of the corrections have been made.

But, in the main, the effects of most typos are negligible. This makes them relatively uninteresting, however diverting. So, instead, I will focus on examples of Readily Avoidable Errors. Some of these are faintly risible. For example, I permit myself a smile when I see philosopher Alex Rosenberg launching into a story about Talleyrand that has him serving the Sun King decades before he—Talleyrand—was born. But I know that this is simply the result of an innocent transposition of letters: ‘Louis XIV’ for ‘Louis XVI’ (Rosenberg 2011, 14). Even more amusing is Rosenberg’s misquoting of the title of Lucretius’s famous poem, *De rerum natura* (*On the nature of things*). He gives this as ‘De rarum naturum’. Rosenberg comments, “If Lucretius had not used the title, I would have taken it for my own” (2011, 331). Little did he know he could have done so with impunity. But what explains his mistake? Was he quoting from memory? It is a little surprising that his editor missed it as well. Even in the absence of a good reference library, it can be checked online in a second. Clearly titles are not Rosenberg’s strong suit: at one point he refers to a non-existent work by Jacques Derrida: ‘Narratives will always be with us. Derrida’s *Narratology* solemnly attests to the fact’ (Rosenberg 2011, p. 305). I can only assume he means *Of grammarology*. Such things are easily checked, and with little effort.

In the following four case studies, I will briefly examine some startling instances of mistakes that were surely readily avoidable.

Case study no. 1: Pam Oliver’s *Raids on Australia*

In a recent study titled *Raids on Australia: 1942 and Japan’s plans for Australia*, historian Pam Oliver writes:

On 8 June 1942, Japanese mini submarine I-24 entered and fired 10 rounds in Sydney Harbour sinking the *Kuttabul*. One shell exploded at Bellevue Hill. At Newcastle on 8 June at 2 am, submarine I-21 commanded by Captain Matsumura fired 34 shells nine kilometres off Fort Scratchley at the mouth of the Hunter River. (Oliver 2010, 12)

This is a stunning concoction of truth and falsehood. Ignore for a moment the third sentence’s poor syntax; what it says is essentially true. The first sentence, however, is utterly confused, and not just because of its similarly poor structure.

The facts are these. In the late afternoon of 31 May 1942 three large Japanese submarines, *I-22*, *I-24* and *I-27*, sitting about seven nautical miles (13 kilometres) off Sydney Harbour, each launched a Type A midget submarine for an attack on shipping in Sydney Harbour. Two of these midget submarines came to grief, but just after midnight one of them, the midget

5 Some typos have long arms, reaching out to influence even our cultural history. In his poem *Works and days*, the Greek poet Hesiod wrote that Pandora opened a jar (*pithos*) and released all the evils that subsequently afflicted mankind. The famous Renaissance humanist Erasmus translated this into Latin as *pyxis* (box) (Grafton 2011, 159). And the rest is history.

from *I-24*, fired a torpedo that missed its intended target but exploded near the depot ship HMAS *Kuttabul*, sinking it for the loss of 21 lives. A week later, two of the large ‘mother’ submarines lying well off shore (*I-24* and *I-21*) shelled Sydney and Newcastle respectively. Of the ten rounds fired by *I-24*, nine landed in the eastern suburbs and one in the harbour. Only one shell exploded, and none of them caused any real damage or serious injury.⁶

So, *I-24* was not a ‘mini submarine’; it never entered Sydney Harbour; and the *Kuttabul* was not sunk by gunfire. Moreover, the Japanese midget submarine raid occurred a week before Oliver says it did, and it involved three submarines not one. Bear in mind that this event is one of the most famous incidents of Australia’s Second World War, and constitutes one of the two outstanding examples—the other is the bombing of Darwin in February 1942—of the very raids on Australia that are the ostensible topic of Oliver’s book.

Readers ignorant of the relevant history will find Oliver’s treatment of these raids quite difficult to follow. For example, on the page preceding the sentences I quoted, Oliver had already stated, ‘In May 1942 Sydney and Newcastle experienced raids’ (Oliver 2010, 11). This is not only false (the Newcastle raid occurred in June, as we saw) but also inconsistent with her own later account. Another careless error is to be found on p. 12, where she refers to a ‘survey conducted by the *Daily Telegraph* on 26 February 1942, just five days after the [Darwin] raids began’ (Oliver 2010, 12). But the first two bombing raids on Darwin occurred on 19 February, so this should read ‘seven’ days later, not ‘five’.

How can a professional historian make such basic errors and—in particular—get such a well-known event so wrong? One reviewer of the book, historian Steven Bullard, has pointed out that the bulk of Oliver’s book is given over to a careful and detailed analysis of Japanese activities in Australia in the interwar years that has much to recommend it. Bullard refers to ‘Oliver’s foray into military history’, noting that this is ‘a field in which the author seems not entirely comfortable’, which may serve to explain some of the author’s more regrettable errors (Bullard 2012, 68).

Case study no. 2: Jonathan King’s *Gallipoli: last man standing*

In 2003 historian Jonathan King brought out a biography of the last surviving Anzac, Tasmanian Alec Campbell. I will refrain from commenting on the book’s literary merits (it has none). But I do want to examine the lack of care he seems to take over matters of fact. Why bother? Because he is a popular author, whose books appear to sell quite well. And while incompetent books were once allowed to slip quietly into well-deserved oblivion, today the existence of the internet and its search engines renders their effects far more pernicious and long-lasting.

King has a tendency to flesh out Campbell’s relatively uneventful military service with occasional descriptions of battles he did not experience. Here is King’s account of the fighting at Lone Pine and The Nek on Gallipoli:

The bloody battles of early August were almost as devastating as the landings back in April. On 7 August hundreds of young Australians were mown down like a field of wheat as they tried to capture Turkish trenches in a futile charge across a narrow finger of open land called the Nek. Unmounted troops from the Light Horse had been ordered to advance en masse into the Turkish guns. Against the decisive new weapon of the war, the machine gun, they could not possibly have succeeded ... Two days later Australian soldiers of the 1st Brigade captured the strongpoint known as Lone Pine in one of the bloodiest actions of the campaign. They may have killed as many as five thousand Turks, but gaining those few hundred yards cost more than two thousand Australian lives. (King 2003, 46)

6 For a full account, see Nichols 2006.



First, at least so far as the Australians were concerned, the August battles were worse than the landings, not almost as bad. Total Australian deaths for 25–30 April were 860 (and for the May battles, 2,298). For August, they were 2,666 (including 2,054 killed in action). Second, King's chronology is completely skewed: the Australians captured the Turkish trenches at Lone Pine within half an hour of the attack getting under way at 5.30 pm on 6 August—the day *before* the battle at The Nek, not 'two days later'. (They then held on through repeated Turkish counter-attacks over the next three days.) The order in which King discusses the two battles indicates that '7 August' is no mere typo.

Finally, concerning the question of losses, King has committed the tyro's mistake of confusing *casualties* with *fatalities*. The Australians lost more than 2,200 men at Lone Pine—but these were not all deaths.⁷ Indeed, less than a third were fatalities. It is crucial to remember that the term 'casualty' embraces those lost to a unit's fighting force in any way, through being either killed, wounded, captured or missing. For King, this is no one-off: he makes a similar mistake later in the book, when he describes Alec Campbell reading a newspaper account of the Australians' first major engagement on the Western Front. 'His heart wept when he later read of the 5,500 Anzacs killed on 19 July in a single day's fighting during the disastrous battle of Fromelles' (King 2003, 103). The actual Australian deaths were 1,917 out of 5,533 casualties.

This slipshod treatment of his subject matter is unfortunately all too typical of King's approach: for example, he twice wrongly refers to Winston Churchill as 'Britain's First Sea Lord' (King 2003, xiii and 38). At the time of the Gallipoli campaign, the First Sea Lord was Admiral 'Jackie' Fisher (who was succeeded in May 1915 by Admiral Sir Henry Jackson); Churchill was First Lord of the Admiralty, a Cabinet post. And elsewhere King refers to the occasion in August 1918 when General John Monash was knighted on the battlefield by George V. He rightly notes that Monash was 'the first soldier to be knighted in battle for 200 years'—making allowance for the loose formulation 'knighted in *battle*'—but then immediately ruins it by adding, 'he was also the last'. Not so. In October 1944, George VI knighted Lieutenant General Miles Dempsey, Commander of the British 2nd Army, during a visit to the battlefield.

These are not major errors, but they are very careless ones, and in every instance the facts could easily have been checked. Lone Pine and The Nek, for example, are two of the most famous Australian battles: how do you manage to get their dates completely wrong?

It seems that, for King, near enough is all too often good enough. Now it is important to remember that King is no amateur military historian; he has, the book jacket declares, 'a PhD in politics and history from the University of Melbourne'.

Case study no. 3: the glossary for *Pythagorean crimes*

In 2008 Parmenides Fiction published a translation of a novel by Tefros Michaelides titled *Pythagorean crimes*. Although it is a novel, and hence not bound by the requirement for strict historical accuracy, the publisher does boast in a 'Note to the Reader' that for this edition it 'has provided an extensive glossary of terms with descriptions and explanations of names, locations, expressions and historic events that occur. This glossary ... is an exclusive feature of this English edition. Its purpose is to make the book both enjoyable and educational, with the hope of inspiring further interest in the many themes and subjects it explores' (Michaelides 2008, vii).⁸ As such, it is only reasonable to expect that the information provided in this glossary, which runs to almost 40 pages, will be accurate.

7 Here is an example of the sort of sentence than can mislead the unwary: 'In an area smaller than a city block, the Turks lost 5000 men and the Australians over 2000—more than 50 per cent of the 1st brigade' (Pedersen 2007, 92). It should also be pointed out that not all of the 5,000 Turkish casualties died either.

8 I should stress that it appears the novelist bears no responsibility for the glossary that has so unfortunately marred his otherwise intriguing book.



But much of it is not. Apart from being appallingly written, this glossary contains a large number of readily avoidable, and sometimes utterly bizarre, errors. We are told, for example, that Columbus was ‘a Spanish navigator’ (no, he was Genovese); that Henri Poincaré was a ‘French mathematician who, along with Albert Einstein and Henrik Lorentz, discovered the special theory of relativity’ (this is nonsense: Einstein was the sole discoverer, though scholars have established that Poincaré did come close to anticipating some of the key ideas); and that Anaxagoras ‘was imprisoned for claiming that the Sun was not a God and that the Moon reflected the Sun’s light’ (he was not).⁹

Some of the entries sound like a joke. The entry for Macedonia, for example, describes it thus: ‘Historical region in southeastern Greece, ruled by Alexander the Great before being overtaken by the Ottoman Empire’ (Michaelides 2008, 254). Ignoring the poor syntax and the clunkiness of calling Macedonia a ‘historical region’, to say it is in ‘southeastern Greece’ is analogous to locating Indonesia in Victoria. Presumably the author meant to say ‘southeastern Europe’. And, yes, it was ruled by the Ottoman Empire, but only after the Ottoman victory at Kosovo in 1389, more than 1,700 years after Alexander’s death—so at best the sentence is very misleading.

The worst entry concerns Bertrand Russell and contains the following series of claims:

While attending the 1900 International Congress of Mathematicians in Paris, he became highly interested in the mathematical field. He researched the works of Peano, who had made a considerable impression on him at the conference, and by 1903 he had written his first major book, *The Principles of Mathematics*, co-authored by Alfred North Whitehead. (Michaelides 2008, 265–66)

Most of these statements are false. Russell did not attend the ‘1900 International Conference of Mathematicians’; in July 1900, he did attend the First International Congress of Philosophy in Paris which immediately preceded the Second International Congress of Mathematics, but he had left before the latter got under way in August. In any case, one can hardly claim that it was while attending this conference that Russell ‘became interested in the mathematical field’: he had, after all, originally gone up to Trinity College, Cambridge, to study mathematics (he got a First in the Mathematical Tripos in 1893 before turning to philosophy for his fourth year), and in 1897 he published a book entitled *An essay on the foundations of geometry*, based on his fellowship dissertation (Griffin 2003, 3–4). It is true that Russell published *The principles of mathematics* in 1903, but it was hardly ‘his first major work’: he had three years earlier brought out a seminal work in philosophy, *A critical examination of the philosophy of Leibniz* (Cambridge University Press, 1900).¹⁰

And *The principles of mathematics* was not co-authored with A N Whitehead: Russell was its sole author. The epic three-volume work he did co-author with Whitehead a decade later was called *Principia mathematica* (Cambridge University Press, 1910–13). It beggars belief that anyone presumably competent enough to have been commissioned to write a technical glossary such as the one in this book could have confused these two works, even taking into account the almost identical titles (trading English for Latin); the merest glance at Wikipedia—or any good reference work—would have put them right. The evident failure to undertake even the most basic of checks is perplexing.

9 While Anaxagoras was tried for impiety, he was not imprisoned – some accounts say he was fined and banished, others that he was condemned to death (but saved by the intervention of Pericles), others that he prudently decided to leave the city. See Curd 2010, 136. The incorrect Glossary entries are to be found in Michaelides 2008, 240, 261, 235.

10 This has been described as the best book ever written by one philosopher about another.



It should be pointed out that Parmenides Publishing—despite the somewhat suspect name—is a very reputable publisher that brings out highly scholarly publications, mainly in the field of ancient Greek philosophy. So it is particularly disappointing to see it publish something filled with such careless errors.¹¹

Now it might be argued that these errors do not matter all that much. It is true that Russell did first encounter Peano in Paris in July 1900, and that for him the event was crucial: ‘The Congress was a turning point in my intellectual life, because there I met Peano’ (Russell 1967, 144). That is the important point, the anti-pedant might assert: the rest hardly matters. And indeed at least one colleague for whom I rehearsed this list of errors responded in precisely this way.

However, I am not convinced: when I encounter such carelessness, I cannot quite get the nagging suspicion out of my head that if the author is so cavalier about such details then I cannot trust the rest of the book’s claims. And if I cannot trust the minor details, why should I accept the larger, more substantive claims?

Case study no. 4: Bardi’s *The calculus wars*

One wonders why Jason Socrates Bardi’s book was written: there already exist numerous excellent accounts of the Newton–Leibniz quarrel over who deserves priority for the invention of the calculus. The authoritative account is A Rupert Hall’s 1980 work, *Philosophers at war*; Hall has also written an excellent summary of the controversy.¹² Having embarked on the task, however, the author’s duty was to produce a popular account that was well-written and accurate. He has failed on both counts. The work is marred by the author’s schoolboy prose and factual inaccuracies, and by a host of misspellings and typographical errors.¹³

The problems begin early, in the book’s very first sentence, in fact. Concerning the date of Newton’s death, Bardi is all over the shop. In the first sentence of his Preface, he gives it as 1726, but on p. 237 this has become 1727. And just a few lines later he says he was buried on 28 March 1726, a date he later repeats (Bardi 2006, 259). Now it is perhaps understandable that this date should have given Bardi trouble: in Newton’s time, the year officially began on 25 March. This renders the facts here quite tricky: Newton died on 20 March 1726 and was buried eight days later on 28 March 1727. As a result, historians usually adjust his death date to 1727 (in line with the fiction that 1 January began the new year). Bardi really seems to be confused by all of this. On p. 239 he misquotes Newton’s epitaph in Westminster Abbey: ‘Died 20 March 1727’: it actually reads ‘OBIIT. XX. MAR. MDCCXXVI’, so 1726.¹⁴ This date is given in contemporary Old Style, which present-day New Style dating would change to 1727. But it is poor practice for Bardi simply to change the inscription he is quoting (assuming that it was done intentionally and is not just another instance of carelessness), especially given that he has not consistently made the correct adjustment elsewhere.

11 Here is part of the blurb for the novel on the publisher’s website: ‘Michael and Stefanos meet at the groundbreaking Second International Congress of Mathematics in 1900, at which the greatest mathematical minds of the 20th Century—Hilbert, Poincaré, Bertrand Russell, Gödel—probed the depths of mathematical mystery and challenged the very foundations on which all of mathematical theory is based.’ [Online]. Available: <http://www.parmenides.com/publications/Michaelides> [Accessed 21 December 2012]. As we have seen, Bertrand Russell did not attend *this* conference, but we can readily imagine he might have stayed on for it. But Gödel’s attendance is slightly more problematic since he was not born until 1906, six years after the conference occurred. You might say, ‘Well, it’s just a novel’, but as far as I can tell the novelist himself does not pretend that Gödel was there.

12 See Hall 1980, and for a shorter account, Hall 2002.

13 To give just one example: in the same sentence on p. 80, Bremen is referred to twice; the first time it is spelled correctly, but then it appears as ‘Bremin’ just eight words later.

14 [Online] Available: <http://www.westminster-abbey.org/our-history/people/sir-isaac-newton> [Accessed 31 December 2012]. The translation Bardi gives of the inscription—it is unclear whether it is his own—is quite poor.

This is somewhat arcane stuff, and our author can be forgiven for not knowing it. But such ignorance cannot explain how—on the same page—Bardi has Newton dying in 1727 and then being buried in 1726. That is just carelessness. In any case, either Bardi or his editor should have noticed the various inconsistencies, and these should have provided the spur to do a bit of research to get to the bottom of these conflicting dates.

Casual errors infect the book throughout. Referring to the birth of the Royal Society, Bardi writes: ‘the Invisible College was resurrected and reborn on July 15, 1662, as the Royal Society for [*sic*] London for Improving Natural Knowledge, with ninety-eight charter members.’ (Bardi 2006, 66) The official foundation date for the Royal Society is 28 November 1660, when a group of a dozen men met at Gresham College after a lecture by Christopher Wren to found ‘a Colledge for the promoting of Physico-Mathematicall and Experimentall Learning’. The name ‘The Royal Society’ first appeared in print in 1661, and it was not until the second Royal Charter of 1663 that the Society was referred to as ‘The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge’.¹⁵

Bardi’s comments on the famous ‘falling apple’ story exemplifies his sloppiness: first, we are told ‘it is probably completely fabricated’ (Bardi 2006, 34). But, just two lines later, likelihood has hardened into certainty: ‘The story is no more true that the one about the alligators in the sewers of New York.’ But Newton himself recounted the story on four separate occasions. If Bardi is convinced it is apocryphal he owes us some evidence, something more tangible than mere dismissal. In fact, in its rough outlines the story is likely to be true. As Richard Westfall, the author of the definitive biography of Newton, notes, ‘It is too well attested to be thrown out of court’ (Westfall 1980, 154). While the apple story ‘vulgarizes universal gravitation by treating it as a bright idea ... Newton must have had something in mind when he compared the moon’s centrifugal force with gravity, and there is every reason to believe that the fall of an apple gave rise to it’ (Westfall 1980, 155).

One of the more lamentable facts of modern publishing is that even for scholarly works the practice of sending a manuscript out to expert readers for assessment is no longer always followed.¹⁶ But what we have here is a good example of precisely the sort of assistance expert readers might have given to help save this book. When Bardi’s book did appear, reviewers found a great many technical errors in it; personally, I gave up expecting to find anything of the book worthwhile when halfway through it I came across this sentence: ‘[Newton] later wrote to a man called Bently [*sic*] that he did not pretend to know the cause of gravity’ (Bardi 2006, 130).¹⁷ Now Richard Bentley was already (in 1693, when this correspondence took place) a formidable classical scholar known to Newton. (At the time they were both living at Trinity College). Bentley, who would later become Master of Trinity, is renowned as the ‘founder of historical philology’; A E Housman called him the greatest classical scholar ‘that England or perhaps Europe ever bred’ (Housman 1962, p. 12). So it is surprising to discover that Bardi appears to be ignorant of him and does not spell his name correctly. But maybe I am being too hard on Bardi: perhaps it is only the awkwardness of his prose that leads me to suspect he does not really know who Bentley was. For example, the very next sentence reads: ‘In fact, Newton wrote in the *Principia* the famous phrase, *non fingo hypotheses*, or “I do not invent hypotheses.”’ (Bardi 2006, 130). (Almost needless to say, Newton actually wrote *hypotheses non fingo*.¹⁸)

15 [Online] Available: <http://royalsociety.org/about-us/history/> [Accessed 31 December 2012]. Incidentally, the Royal Society’s motto is *Nullius in verba* (‘take nobody’s word for it’)—particularly apt given the topic of this paper.

16 Colleagues tell me that one very reputable academic publisher now only sends out book proposals for assessment.

17 Westfall’s biography of Newton quotes the relevant section of the letter: ‘for ye cause of gravity is what I do not pretend to know, & therefore would take more time to consider of it’ (Westfall 1980, 505).

18 See Cohen’s ‘A guide to Newton’s *Principia*’, in Newton 1999, 275–76. The meaning is unchanged, of course, but it is typical of a generally careless approach not to provide the phrase in its correct (and very familiar) form.



Bardi does thank his publishers and their staff for their help with the manuscript, but one wonders how much help they could have provided, in light of the inside-cover blurb, which proudly announces: ‘In the tradition of *Wittgenstein’s Poker*—a scientific potboiler about Sir Isaac Newton and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s bitter and lifelong battle over the invention of calculus.’ If only this book were in the tradition of Edmonds and Eidinow’s marvellously written, scrupulously accurate book, but sadly it is not. More interestingly, though, do the publishers really think ‘potboiler’ is a term of approbation? But rather than smiling at the risibility of this description, perhaps we should simply applaud their candour and their accuracy on this occasion.

Why bother?

I suggested earlier that it is right and proper to care about getting even relatively minor details right. Let me give you four reasons why I think this is so important. First, readers deserve the truth; it seems almost trite to say it, but there it is. Perhaps readers should be more sceptical about every statement they read, but in reality they will usually simply accept what is published in supposedly reputable books as being true. Second, while there is clearly a limit to what should be conveyed, readers deserve the whole truth, not just the gist of the story or the main point; if the gist was all that was truly important why not get the author just to churn out an article? If you are going to go to the trouble of putting details in at all, then why not make the further effort to get them right? Third, being sloppy about matters of accuracy is an indirect insult to all those authors and editors who do labour assiduously to get things right. If they take the trouble to ensure accuracy, so should everyone else. Finally, as suggested earlier, if the author cannot get the small stuff right, why should you trust them about the big stuff? In the end, only a more prolonged inspection will enable the reader to decide whether the errors are typical or aberrant. That is to say, whether we are dealing with a truly careless author, or merely an unlucky one.

It is slightly ironic that at a time when the internet offers ready assistance for checking details, authors and publishers seem to be relying on it less and less to check simple facts. Or perhaps they are simply relying on it too much, but all too uncritically. We can now obtain in seconds online digital scans of the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, 1665–1887, for example. But the same technology also throws up tendentious blogs and bogus websites run by people for whom a concern for accuracy is wholly foreign. This renders it more important than ever to critically assess one’s sources.

Another worrying trend has appeared in recent years. Once upon a time reputable publishers took care to ensure the books they published met at least basic standards of accuracy. Unfortunately, some now seem to be failing in this duty. Take the case of Gavin Menzies’s best-selling *1421: the year China discovered the world*, published by Transworld Publishers in its History list. Most reputable scholars regard it as fanciful nonsense, so how did it get published? Perhaps one critic has the answer: ‘Apparently revenue stream trumps considerations of factual accuracy, literary merit and intellectual integrity’ (Fritze 2009, 101).

Excuses, or who’s responsible?

Errors in books have been there from the very beginning of our print culture, and they have always been criticised. And those responsible for them have always been ready with their excuses. In his book *The culture of correction in Renaissance Europe*, Anthony Grafton describes some of the many excuses given by ‘correctors’, the precursors of the modern editor and proofreader. Some blamed the working conditions: ‘In winter, working by candlelight, when the rooms are warm and the printers become lazy and sleepy, it’s easy to overlook things.’ Others invoked Satan, who made a ‘special effort to make printers careless’ (2011, 79).



There are always excuses. Here is Matthias Schürer, a corrector who would later become a notable printer, writing in March 1505:

Do not be surprised or fly into a rage if there are inversions, transpositions, changes and omissions in this book. No one can see everything. I am a human being, and a human being with two eyes, not Argus, whose head ... was girdled with a hundred eyes. Believe the man who has learned from experience: it is impossible to carry out so close an inspection that you detect every flaw. Moreover, the printer's copy was truncated, corrupt and full of mistakes, all of which was the scribe's fault. And the fact that the Frankfurt fair was approaching forced us to print this in a very short time. (Grafton 2011, 84)

Authors are human beings too, and they too will always make mistakes. It is often impossible to decide whether to blame the author for committing an error or the editor (or proofreader) for failing to correct it. What interests me are the occasions when everyone—author, editor, and printer—misses something so obvious as to astound us.

When it comes to relatively minor slips, the onus is on the author, the copyeditor and the proofreader between them to have picked them up. So Oliver, King, Bardi and the anonymous author of the glossary made a series of careless errors, and their editors and proofreaders let them down by failing to save them from at least some of the more obvious ones. But often a slip is so glaring no one notices. On the back cover of Raymond Bradley's *The nature of all being*, the book's title has been misquoted. The proper title is slightly odd—even for a philosophy book—so possibly the blurb writer unconsciously plumped for '*The nature of being*' as being more likely.

Sometimes it is the editor who imports the error into the text. In his article 'Editing and its discontents', John Gross recounts a tale of compounded error. Reading through some proofs for an article in a paper he was editing, Gross came across a 'puzzling reference to 'the soft Celtic mistiness of Yeats and Housman'. It brought him up short: perhaps this description might apply to the young Yeats, but Housman, the famously tough-minded classical scholar and poet? He set off to find the original typescript:

It was just as well that I did. The author of the article had in fact written 'the soft Celtic mistiness of Yeats and A.E.'—George William Russell, poet and mystic, leading associate of Yeats in the Irish Renaissance ... One subeditor, assuming that the name 'Housman' must have been dropped, had silently 'restored' it; then a second subeditor, no less alert, had decided that Housman was too well known to need his initials. Hey presto! (Gross 1990, 284)

This is an intriguing example, but what really caused all the problems here? Look at the key word in Gross's account: 'silently'. It was the fact that both editorial emendations were done silently, invisibly, that was to blame. Had the copyeditors simply queried the author—as they should have—the problem would have been avoided: the author might have been annoyed to have his time wasted, but harm would have been prevented. While it remains the author's responsibility to get the facts right, it is also the copyeditor's responsibility to query something she thinks suspect.¹⁹ (Although if she tries the author's patience with a succession of dumb queries, the author will rightly take offense.)

So, ultimately, who is responsible for Readily Avoidable Errors? The easy answer is everyone involved in the project to a certain degree, but the real answer is the author. In the end, the onus is on authors to check whatever has been placed before them by the editor, the publisher or the designer for sign-off. After all, it is the author's name that is on the cover. That is why the editor can never be too aggrieved if a canny correction or fabulous suggestion for improvement is dismissed with a 'stet'.

¹⁹ 'Copyeditors are not responsible for the factual correctness of a manuscript, but you are expected to offer a polite query about factual statements that you know to be incorrect' (Einsohn 2000, 9).



Exhibition errors

It is somewhat ironic that exhibitions, which of their nature are more ephemeral productions than books, should by and large contain fewer errors than books. (This is merely my own experience, which may be unrepresentative.) I think this is due to the fact that relatively more editorial, fact-checking and proofreading resources are brought to bear on exhibitions, and so there is often more opportunity to put things right. Another factor may be that these highly visible productions constitute the core business of museums and galleries, who therefore have more to lose from allowing silly mistakes to slip through.

This is not to say that those writing museum text labels do not commit their fair share of error. The author of the following statement, an art curator writing about a drawing showing diplomats squabbling just before the outbreak of the Second World War had clearly not taken much trouble to check his facts: ‘The Second World War began in 1938 when Germany invaded Austria.’ An interesting interpretation of the *Anschluss*, to say the least. But, as a rule, during the exhibition process there are a great many opportunities to put things right, and this slip was quickly corrected. Some errors are slightly harder to spot. In one draft label, an author asserted that the prevalence of gym equipment in Catholic schools early in the twentieth century was ‘evidence that Catholic schools sought always to provide a fully rounded education for their pupils and could not be accused of following any narrowly based religious system’. Clearly, this is flawed logic: you might as well argue that the acknowledged Nazi emphasis on sport and physical fitness was evidence that they did not follow a narrowly based ideological system.

Typically, I find I get to spend relatively more time editing and fact-checking exhibition panels and labels, and get to see a great many more proofs, than I ever do with the books or journal articles we publish. Mind you, sometimes the extra time is needed. I recall a curator who refused to accept that “third quarter, sixth century BC” does not mean c. 700 BC (but rather c. 530 BC). The Greek *skyphos* (two-handled wine cup) in question was a loan from a local classics museum, and so far as I am aware the curator was not an expert in this area. I knew the date was wrong because, as luck would have it, six months earlier I had been given the job of editing the text for the museum’s newly refurbished gallery and the date had been discussed at that time. Twice the author resisted polite queries, even though the second time I explained how I thought the mistake might quite reasonably have come about. Normally, I would have left it there, but I knew the people at the classics museum very well, and knew how annoyed they would be at such an obvious misdating error, especially as I had re-confirmed the date with them. Only when I pointed this out did the author relent.

A cautionary tale

But perhaps we should not be too hard on obvious errors. Here is the story of an embarrassing error in a sculpture exhibition, the text for which I edited. One of the works was a small but exquisite paper sculpture of two soldiers on leave in London by Australian artist Gladys Blaiberg. As part of the editing process, I checked the spelling of the sculptor’s name, the work’s accession number and medium details, and its title.

According to the museum’s database, the title was *Skirker*. Although the title was in fact inscribed on the sculpture’s small plinth, the work was in the process of being conserved, so could not be sighted—and in any case what museum editor insists on inspecting every item before it goes on display? The actual title could not be made out on-screen, so it seemed quite reasonable to take the database information at face value. And the title seemed plausible enough: some soldiers were known to have shirked their duty, after all.

Alas, the database was wrong, compiled using information that had apparently been jotted down incorrectly when the item was first accessioned decades earlier. The title was really *Shikker*, the Yiddish word for a drunk. And when I finally got to see the work, I could see



quite plainly that one of two tiny figures was indeed drunk and being helped along the street by the other. Trouble was, I only saw it for the first time on opening night, with the incorrect title proudly displayed on the label just to one side of the correct title on the work itself.

I think of this example whenever I see a ‘surely they couldn’t have missed that’ error. I cannot resist sharing the final irony. When I returned to the museum after an absence of two years, the *sculpture* had gone back on display—complete with the wrong title. Apparently, a new curator had re-inspected the original—incorrect—file and changed the database back to what it had been before I corrected it. Once again, no one had thought to look first at the actual piece.

The future?

Readers and museum visitors clearly care very much about getting things right, if the letters they write are anything to go by. But it takes a great deal of effort, often on the part of many people, to achieve accuracy. Will it continue to be possible to do so? Let me tell you a story which I hope is not a sign of the times.

Recently, I saw two piles of books prominently displayed in a bookshop. One book was written by someone at the museum where I work, and I knew it to be a fine piece of writing built upon fastidious research (and a considerable amount of fact-checking). I enquired about its sales, and was told it was doing very well indeed. And what about the other, I asked? That also was doing very well. I confided that some of my colleagues had shown this second work to be chock-full of spurious argumentation, demonstrable untruths, and shoddy, even bogus, references. ‘That’s as may be,’ the bookseller allowed, ‘but, you know, I get the same profit from both.’ The phenomenal success of works of pseudo-history such as Gavin Menzies’s *1421*, or even the more moderate success of a King or a Bardi, may mean that such pragmatism will be needed even more in the future.

Reference list

- Bardi J S (2006). *The calculus wars: Newton, Leibniz, and the greatest mathematical clash of all time*. New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press.
- Bradley R (1992). *The nature of all being: a study of Wittgenstein’s modal atomism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bullard S (2012). Review: Pam Oliver, *Raid on Australia: 1942 and Japan’s plans for Australia*. *Wartime*, 59: 68.
- Butt J (Ed) (1963). *The poems of Alexander Pope*. London: Methuen & Co.
- Curd P (Trans and Ed) (2010). *Anaxagoras of Clazomenae: fragments and testimonia*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Edmonds D & Eidinow J (2001). *Wittgenstein’s poker: the story of a ten-minute argument between two great philosophers*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Einsohn A (2000). *The copyeditor’s handbook: a guide for book publishing and corporate communication*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Fritze R H (2009). *Invented knowledge: false history, fake science and pseudo-religions*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Grafton A (2011). *The culture of correction in Renaissance Europe*. London: The British Library.
- Greenblatt S (2011). *The swerve: how the world became modern*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co.
- Gross J (1990). Editing and its discontents. In C Ricks & L Michaels (Eds). *The state of the language* (pp282–88). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Griffin N (Ed) (2003). *The Cambridge companion to Bertrand Russell*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Housman A E (1962). *Selected prose*. John Carter (Ed). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hall A R (1980). *Philosophers at war: the quarrel between Newton and Leibniz*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Hall A R (2002). Newton versus Leibniz: from geometry to metaphysics. In IB Cohen and GE Smith (Eds). *The Cambridge companion to Newton* (pp431–54). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Innes M (1961). *Hamlet, revenge: a story in four parts*. London: Penguin.
- King J (2003). *Gallipoli: our last man standing: the extraordinary life of Alec Campbell*. John Wiley and Sons.
- Menzies G (2002). *1421: the year China discovered America*. London: Bantam Press
- Michaelides T (2008). *Pythagorean Crimes. Lena Cavanagh (Trans)*. Las Vegas: Parmenides Fiction.
- Newton I (1999). *The Principia: mathematical principles of natural philosophy*. IB Cohen & A Whitman (Trans). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Nichols R (2006). The night the war came to Sydney. *Wartime* 33: 26–31.
- Oliver P (2010). *Raid on Australia: 1942 and Japan's plans for Australia*. Australian Scholarly Publishing.
- Pedersen P (2007). *The Anzacs: Gallipoli to the Western Front*. Camberwell: Viking.
- Rosenberg A (2011) *The atheist's guide to reality: enjoying life without illusions*. New York, W.W. Norton and Co.
- Russell B (1967). *Autobiography*. Vol. 1: 1872–1914. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Shermer M (2001). *The borderlands of sense: where sense meets nonsense*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Strunk W Jr & White E B (2005). *The elements of style*. Maira Kalman (Illus). New York: The Penguin Press.
- Westfall R S (1980). *Never at rest: a biography of Isaac Newton*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

