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Some Notes on 20 Years of Book Reviews in *Prometheus*[1]

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ABSTRACT *After considering several alternative ways of approaching the task of 'reviewing book reviews', this paper presents some descriptive data on the book-reviewing function in* Prometheus *during the 20-year period from 1983 to 2002. It is shown that the average annual number of reviews is approximately 32 and that there is approximately one review article per annum. The proportion of total pages devoted to the book-review function is also calculated. A disaggregated analysis of the books reviewed, in terms of the five themes of* Prometheus*, i.e. Technological Change, Innovation, Information Economics, Communication and Science Policy, is also presented.*

Keywords: Prometheus, book reviews, technological change, innovation, information economics, communication, science policy.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present some data (and provide some qualified evaluative statements) on that scholarly activity that is commonly undertaken in the pages of a journal, i.e. the reviewing of books. Thus, this exercise involves 'reviewing' the reviews of numerous books. Given the focus of this issue of *Prometheus* it is not surprising that attention is directed to book reviews that have appeared in the pages of this journal. The account of this activity is restricted to the 20-year period 1983–2002, i.e. it is confined to the first 20 volumes of *Prometheus*.

How does one undertake such an activity? Clearly it is somewhat different from undertaking a review of a single book, or a number of books in a joint review. Also the heterogeneity of the issues covered by *Prometheus* creates some difficulty for such an activity as this. One perspective that could be adopted is that of the subscriber/reader. An alternative perspective is that of the producer: and if so, is this the perspective of the editor(s), or the publisher? A cost-minimising producer may take the view that the appropriate number of reviews is quite small, and that the appropriate length of each review is one sentence. In the limit the cost-minimising producer perspective may lead to a small list of books in a 'Books Received' section, but such a practice does not necessarily serve the interests of subscribers/readers of an academic journal. The producer perspective has little to recommend it and will not be pursued further.

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There is an immediate problem with adopting (or trying to serve) the consumer/reader interest: readers are heterogeneous in their interests/preferences etc. Such heterogeneity is more severe in a multi-disciplinary journal which is concerned with 'any aspect of issues in Technological Change, Innovation, Information Economics, Communication and Science Policy', as stated on the front cover of *Prometheus*. 'Any aspect' of the five central themes addressed by the journal clearly implies a multi-disciplinary approach: the editors were not, and are not, into proscription or homogeneity. If the contributors are heterogeneous, there is a very high probability that the readership will also exhibit this characteristic.

Thus, if one were undertaking an 'evaluation' of the success of the book reviewing process one could undertake a subscriber (and previous subscriber) and reader (and previous reader) survey. This would be a difficult (and expensive) exercise, and has not been undertaken here.

After some reflection (and somewhat random reading of reviews) what has been undertaken is rather modest. All issues of the journal (from Vol. 1, No. 1. to Vol. 20, No. 4.) have been examined and a numerical analysis has been undertaken. More specifically answers to the following questions have been sought.

(i) How many book reviews have been undertaken?
(ii) How many review/survey articles have been published?
(iii) How have these reviews been distributed in terms of the five major themes that are the focus of *Prometheus*?

In answering these questions, other issues (e.g. temporal changes in book reviewing) will be illuminated.

Some Initial Quantification

How many reviews have there been, and what is the relative importance of reviews in terms of total academic content in the journal? As implied above, with respect to *Prometheus*, this question is too broad as there have been, first, conventional reviews of a single book (or joint reviews of several books on a similar topic), and second, 'Review Articles'. This second category, it must be said, is not the same as a related category of review, i.e. the comprehensive survey article such as those published in the *Journal of Economic Literature*.

Before proceeding it is relevant to observe that *Prometheus* has typically had a section entitled 'Shorter Notices', or 'Book Notes'. In some cases a very brief account (one or two sentences) of a book/report that may be of interest to readers was prepared. In other cases a more detailed paragraph may have been written. Some examples of items included in 'Shorter Notices' are indicated in Table 1. These titles (and the titles in subsequent tables) are deliberately not arranged in any sequence.

Thus, the range of material covered varies from handbooks (giving factual information such as addresses, telephone numbers, etc.) to John Toye's interpretative and pedagogic text on economic theories of development.[2]

Pages devoted to this activity (which are typically quite small in number) are not included in the discussion to follow.

Table 2 presents a count of 'Book Reviews' and 'Review Articles' for the period 1983–2002, as well as a count of the number of pages of the journal devoted to these two (related) activities.

Table 1. Some illustrative examples of books/reports listed in 'Shorter Notices', *Prometheus*, 1983–2002

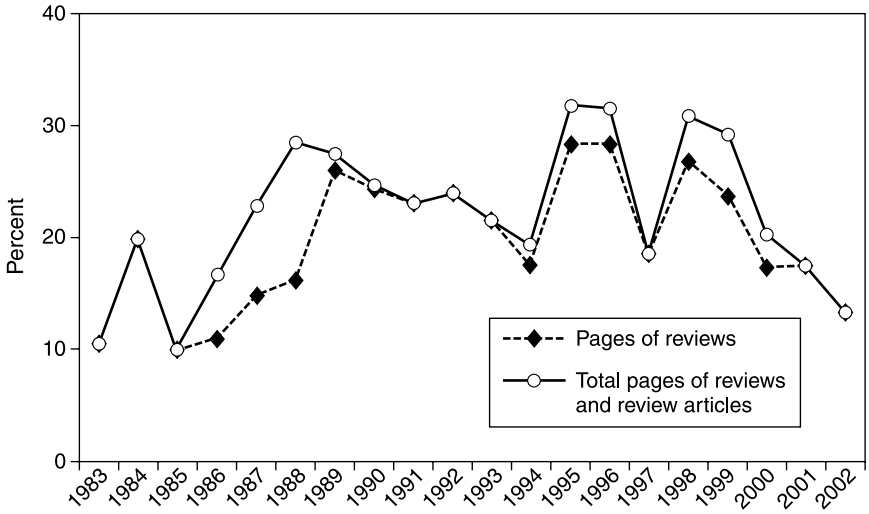
Telemedicine in Australia: A Discussion Paper[3]
Dilemmas of Development: Reflections on the Counter-Revolution in Development Theory and Policy[4]
Scitech Technology Directory: A Comprehensive Guide to Technology Development Assistance in Australia[5]
Microcomputers and Financial Management for the Smaller Business[6]
Usage of Endoscopy in Australia[7]
Scientific and Technical Research Centres in Australia[8]
Handbook of Science and Technology Studies[9]
From Mines to Minds: Western Australia in the Global Information Economy[10]
Ownership of Intellectual Property in Universities: A Discussion Paper[11]
Silicon Visions: The Future of Microcomputer Technology[12]
Decisions and Organizations[13]

Before proceeding to comment on these data it is relevant to make some prefatory comments about 'counting' or 'scoring' procedures and/or the nature of the recording process. First, in determining the number of pages in each volume of the journal, advertisements, news, indices etc. have been excluded, given that

Table 2. Some data on Book Reviews and Review Articles in *Prometheus*, 1983–2002

Year	Volume	No. of Book Reviews	No. of Review Articles	No. of pages of Book Reviews	No. of pages of Review Articles	No. of pages of Reviews and Review Articles	No. of pages of volumes
1983	1	20	0	41	0	41	392
1984	2	21	0	58	0	58	291
1985	3	19	0	46	0	46	467
1986	4	19	2	46	24	70	419
1987	5	36	5	71	38	109	478
1988	6	31	4	73	56	129	451
1989	7	43	1	110	6	116	421
1990	8	43	1	103	2	105	424
1991	9	51	0	100	0	100	433
1992	10	44	0	84	0	84	350
1993	11	32	0	67	0	67	311
1994	12	28	1	53	6	59	303
1995	13	50	1	94	11	105	330
1996	14	37	1	89	10	99	313
1997	15	23	0	60	0	60	322
1998	16	28	1	72	11	83	268
1999	17	44	2	109	25	134	457
2000	18	32	2	79	14	93	457
2001	19	27	0	70	0	70	398
2002	20	19	0	39	0	39	292
TOTAL		647	21	1464	203	1667	7577

Source: Author's tabulation.



Source: Calculated from Table 2.

Figure 1. Percentage of 'pages of reviews' and 'pages of reviews and review articles' to 'total pages' in *Prometheus*, 1983–2002.

the concern here is with academic content. Second, the data have been recorded by volume, rather than by individual issues. This procedure was adopted given that *Prometheus* began with two issues per volume and is now published in four issues, with a three-issue volume in 1997. Third, it should also be recognised that book reviews in the period 1983–96 were published in a smaller point size than in the subsequent years. Fourth, the (physical) size of the journal increased in 1997. Fifth, given that there have been joint reviews (of several books on related issues) it is important to realise that the number of books reviewed exceeds the number of reviewers and/or a simple count of reviews.

Thus, in the period examined *Prometheus* has reviewed 647 books and published 21 review articles. Thus, on average, there have been approximately 32 book reviews per volume over the 20-year period, and an average of one review article per volume. For ease of comprehension, some of the data of Table 2 are reproduced in share (or percentage) form.

In Figure 1, the vertical distance between the two graphs represents the relative importance of the 'Review Articles' in *Prometheus*. It seems clear that 'Book Reviews' have been a consistent dimension of the journal's activities, whereas the commissioning (and publication) of Review Articles could be described as somewhat intermittent or opportunistic.

Table 2 and Figure 1 present an aggregate account of the book reviewing function in *Prometheus*. However it is also relevant to present a more disaggregated account of this activity. The mechanism of disaggregation is suggested by the journal's statement of purpose, i.e. 'to address issues of Technological Change, Innovation, Information Economics, Communications and Science Policy'. However, a sixth category, 'Not Elsewhere Included' has also been added as some books reviewed do not fit into any of 'the five issues'.

Before proceeding to present some disaggregated data on book reviews it is of value to illustrate (and discuss) how the categorisation of books reviewed has been

Table 3. Some illustrative examples of books reviewed on 'Technological Change', *Prometheus*, 1983–2002

Sleepers, Wake! Technology and the Future of Work[14]
Made in Japan: Akio Morita and Sony[15]
Does Technology Drive History? The Dilemma of Technological Determinism[16]
The Economics of Hope: Essays on Technical Change, Economic Growth, and the Environment[17]
Science, Technology, and Society: An Introduction[18]
Endogenous Growth Theory[19]
Trapped in the Net: The Unanticipated Consequences of Computerization[20]
Television in Europe[21]
Technical Change and Full Employment[22]

Table 4. Some illustrative examples of books reviewed on 'Innovation', *Prometheus*, 1983–2002

Towards a Cashless Society[23]
Revolution in Miniature: The History and Impact of Semiconductor Electronics[24]
Copyright Protection of Computer Programs[25]
Solar Energy Patents[26]
Managers and Innovation: Strategies for a Biotechnology[27]
How the West Grew Rich: The Economic Transformation of the Industrial World[28]
Stimulating Innovation: A Systems Approach[29]

undertaken. To put some flesh on the raw bones of the five themes addressed by *Prometheus*, Tables 3–7 present some illustrative titles of books allocated to the five themes, while Table 8 presents some titles allocated to the sixth category, 'Not Elsewhere Included', that is also being employed here.

The primary characteristic that determined the category into which a particular book was placed was the content, or focus, of the book. Put otherwise, no simplistic rule (e.g. all books on telecommunications were allocated to 'Technological Change') was adopted. For example, *Universal Service Obligations in a Competitive Telecommunications Environments*[34] was allocated to the *Prometheus* category of 'Communications', given the book's emphasis on consumer access. On the other hand, another book, such as, *Television in Europe*,[21] given its content and focus, was placed in the 'Technological Change' category. Another example relates to the 'Science Policy' category: the two books, *Chernobyl and Nuclear Power in the USSR*[43]

Table 5. Some illustrative examples of books reviewed on 'Information Economics', *Prometheus*, 1983–2002

Knowledge: Its Creation, Distribution, and Economic Significance, Vol. III, The Economics of Information and Human Capital[30]
Tendencies and Tensions of the Information Age: The Production and Distribution of Information in the United States[31]
World Development Report 1998/99: Knowledge for Development[32]

Table 6. Some illustrative examples of books reviewed on 'Communication', *Prometheus*, 1983–2002

Netiquette[33]
Universal Service Obligations in a Competitive Telecommunications Environment[34]
Gender on the Line: Women, the Telephone, and Community Life[35]
The Political Economy of Communications: International and European Dimensions[36]
Connecting You—Bridging the Communication Gap[37]
Mayer on the Media: Issues and Arguments[38]
Public Access to the Internet[39]
The Cost-Effectiveness of Alternative Library Storage Programs[40]
Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse[41]
The Wired Nation Continent: The Communication Revolution and Federating Australia[42]

and *Challenger: A Major Malfunction*,[45] given their content and themes, were put into this box. On the other hand an historical work, *In Sickness and in Wealth: American Hospitals in the Twentieth Century*[62] was categorised as 'Technological Change', given Stevens' emphasis on the implementation of new technologies in the health sector. However another historical work, *Industry and Ideology: IG Farben in the Nazi Era*[63] was categorised as 'Innovation', given its focus on new products such as 'synthetic rubber'. Another 'Innovation' book was *Safe Blood: Purifying the Nation's Blood Supply*

Table 7. Some illustrative examples of books reviewed on 'Science Policy', *Prometheus*, 1983–2002

Chernobyl and Nuclear Power in the USSR[43]
Science Policy: New Mechanisms for Scientific Collaboration between East and West[44]
Challenger: A Major Malfunction[45]
The Politics of Space: A History of US–Soviet/Russian Competition[46]
Technology and the Tyranny of Export Controls: Whisper Who Dares[47]
Science in Government[48]
Future Directions for CSIRO: A Report to the Prime Minister[49]

Table 8. Some illustrative examples of books reviewed and categorised as 'Not Elsewhere Included', *Prometheus*, 1983–2002

Reform the Law: Essays on the Renewal of the Australian Legal System[50]
Australian Office Administration[51]
Economics and Biology[52]
Prometheus Bound: Science in a Dynamic Steady State[53]
Mining and Australia[54]
Australia Since the Coming of Man[55]
Political Essays[56]
Land of Lost Content: The Luddite Revolt, 1812[57]
A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes[58]
Social Costs of Energy Consumption: External Effects of Electricity Generation in the Federal Republic of Germany[59]
Against Method[60]
Cultural Economics and Cultural Policies[61]

in the Age of AIDS:[64] the authors of this book are highly critical of conventional haemotherapy and strongly advocate a program of long-term autologous collection and storage, i.e. a process innovation.

Table 9 indicates not only the absolute numbers of book reviews in the six categories, but also the percentage share of each category in the total numbers of reviews. There are some clear differences between the categories. Over the 20-year period, the 'Not Elsewhere Included' category represented 31% of total reviews. This percentage share was somewhat variable over the period, having a minimum share of 5% in 1986, and a maximum share (52%) in 2001. However our focus is diverted to the five *Prometheus* themes.

The most important theme, in a quantitative sense, has been 'Technological Change': over the 20-year period the share of this theme was 23%, varying from a minimum of zero in 2001 to a maximum share of 42% in 1985. There has been a slight decrease in the theme's share over time. The second most important theme (quantitatively) has been 'Communication' with an average share of 17%, and with a range of 5% (1985) to 36% (1998). The 'Innovation' theme was the third most important, with an average of 16% and a range of 3% (1993) to 32% (1986). The next most important theme was 'Science Policy' with an average of 10%. The range involved a minimum of zero (2002) and a maximum of 22% in 1993. By far the least important theme, in a quantitative sense, has been 'Information Economics': over the 20 years to 2002, books on this theme have accounted for only 4% of all reviews. There were no reviews on this theme in five separate years, and the maximum was 19% in 1993.

Assuming no editorial bias in books being reviewed in the journal, and no bias by this author in categorising books to the various themes, these shares can provide an indication of the relative importance of these five themes for authors and/or publishers.

Some Concluding Comments

What are the characteristics of a 'good' book review? It is my view that a good review has two attributes: first, the potential consumer or reader of the book needs to be told (in as straight forward, and as descriptive a way possible) what the content and/or argument of the book is. The second characteristic is that the consumer/reader should be offered some evaluation, whether that be by placing the book in the prior literature, or advice to read and/or buy. So a 'good' review is a judicious combination of description and judgment, or whether to buy or read.

For this academic scribbler one of the 'best' reviews in *Prometheus* was Gerhard Rosegger's review of *The Political Economy of Science and Technology*.[65] When I first read this review my immediate emotional reaction was that of envy: I wished that I could write like that.

It is useful to conclude by considering some fine examples of this disposition of a judicious combination of description and evaluation. Take as an example Richard Joseph's review of *Science Parks: An Experiment in High Technology Transfer*.[66] In the first paragraph we are told that this book '. . . can be best described as a "guide" to and review of recent literature on science parks—a hybrid bibliography and commentary' (p. 293). (The reader now has a brief description.) The 'middle part' of the review provides description of content that elaborates the summary statement quoted above; and then we have the evaluation/advice: although the book provides a review and listing of relevant literature there are limitations: 'The

Table 9. Number of Book Reviews, and percentages, using a six-fold classification system, *Prometheus*, 1983–2002

	Technological Change		Innovation		Information Economics		Communications		Science Policy		Not Elsewhere Included		Total Reviews
Year	No.	(%)	No.	(%)	No.	(%)	No.	(%)	No.	(%)	No.	(%)	No.
1983	5	25	2	10	3	15	2	10	1	5	7	35	20
1984	8	38	4	19	1	5	5	24	2	10	1	5	21
1985	8	42	2	11	1	5	1	5	2	11	5	26	19
1986	5	26	6	32	2	11	2	11	3	16	1	5	19
1987	10	28	6	17	1	3	5	14	3	8	11	31	36
1988	8	26	7	23	0	0	3	10	5	16	8	26	31
1989	13	30	9	21	1	2	7	16	3	7	10	23	43
1990	10	23	8	19	0	0	5	12	4	9	16	37	43
1991	13	25	4	8	2	4	4	8	7	14	21	41	51
1992	12	27	11	25	0	0	5	11	5	11	11	25	44
1993	2	6	1	3	6	19	6	19	7	22	10	31	32
1994	5	18	7	25	0	0	6	21	3	11	7	25	28
1995	8	16	5	10	1	2	10	20	5	10	21	42	50
1996	8	22	9	24	1	3	4	11	2	5	13	35	37
1997	7	30	3	13	1	4	2	9	3	13	7	30	23
1998	8	29	1	4	1	4	10	36	2	7	6	21	28
1999	8	18	5	11	1	2	13	30	4	9	13	30	44
2000	6	19	8	25	2	6	8	25	1	3	7	22	32
2001	0	0	3	11	1	4	8	30	1	4	14	52	27
2002	4	21	4	21	0	0	2	11	0	0	9	47	19
TOTAL	148	23	105	16	25	4	108	17	63	10	198	31	647

Source: Author's calculations.

fact that readers are left to deduce their own conclusions leaves many important questions and issues not addressed . . . It is a pity that this text did not exploit the opportunity and capitalise on these issues. The book price puts it out of the reach of most academics, researchers and students. It should have a market as a reference source for technology policy institutions, science park administrators, universities and local governments' (pp. 295–6).

This evaluation by Joseph is neither highly critical nor laudatory: it is informative of content and provides advice. It is useful now to consider an example of a highly critical review, *viz.* John Howell's review of *Challenge to Change: Australia in 2020*,[67] a publication by CSIRO, about CSIRO.

This CSIRO book eschews the old-fashion concept of 'chapters', preferring what the editors (employees of CSIRO) call 'stories', of different science and technology fields.

The editors assert that the stories/chapters, written by CSIRO's 'top people', are 'grounded in the authors' thorough knowledge of what is happening at the cutting edge (*sic*) of their fields', and the reviewer's evaluation is as follows: 'Some [stories] appear hastily written, most are without critical content, unsubstantiated and unreferenced. For the state of the different fields you would be much better advised to read selected articles from *New Scientist* or *Scientific American*'. Howells characterises the contributors as being subject to an all-pervasive 'scientific determinism', which is completely divorced from social science perspectives. He elaborates this point in terms of the following headings: 'On science and society'; 'On planning'; 'On the economy'; and 'On R and D and the economy'.

And his judgement/evaluation? '[T]he text marches unembarrassed into socio-economic territory . . . [It] cuts out whole chunks of literature and debate . . . and its "simplifications" tend to mislead rather than inform'. Elsewhere he describes the text as 'free of the spirit of critical assessment', subject to 'barrenness of thought' and states that 'It is not possible . . . to take this book seriously'. Does Howells give an ultimate judgement and advice? Indeed he does: 'In short, as an unashamed piece of propaganda, this text should be kept off the library shelves'.

It may seem (to some) churlish to end this review-of-reviews on such a highly critical note, as exhibited by Howells' review. Thus some further comment is offered. It is useful, however, to observe that when one re-reads and reflects on Howells' critique one becomes aware of the fundamental scholarship underlying it.

It may be appropriate to conclude with another example of scholarship. I choose several examples from reviews by Don Lamberton, a 'founding father' of *Prometheus*.

In 1985, Lamberton reviewed Machlup's *The Economics of Information and Human Capital*.[68] In part, Lamberton began by quoting Schultz's 'Foreword' to Machlup's book: 'In breath and depth, this is a unique book in economic scholarship . . . The analysis is based on theory and evidence . . . The hallmark of the work . . . is its comprehensive scholarship, in relating each of his specific studies to the general core of economics . . .'. In his review Lamberton devoted considerable space to describing Machlup's classification scheme for information economics. What is central to this (to some people, boring) schema is the all-pervasive nature of information (in one form or another) to economic activity. And what is Lamberton's judgement? 'This is one of the great economics books of the 1980s'. Reviewers often reveal something about themselves by what they choose to quote from a book: that Don Lamberton chose statements by Schultz about Machlup's scholarly disposition tells us something about Lamberton.

Lamberton's comments on *Mapping and Measuring the Information Economy*[69] also exhibit this scholarly disposition. For the authors of this book 'the information economy' is (more or less) coterminous with the 'new IT': for them the 'information economy' is a 'shorthand description for this complex of changes associated with . . . IT and its diffusion through the formal economy . . .'. This is not a perspective that fits Lamberton's conceptions: similarly he is not impressed with the simple (mindless?) reporting of data: 'I kept on looking for results of some processing of these data rather than pleas for more data'.

This work, for Lamberton, suffers from the absence of a theoretical framework, or as Lamberton puts it, little 'recognition of the centrality of the role of information' in an economy, such as that elaborated by Machlup. A second drawback of this work lies in a lack of 'a sense of history'. Lamberton gently suggests that the authors' enthusiasm for the contemporary developments in IT and microelectronics blinds them to other important developments. Their blinkered conception ('IT is itself a fairly recent phenomenon') rules out of court the effects of the mass production of clocks and watches which made people 'attentive to the passage of time, hence to productivity and performance'.[70]

Lamberton then points out that Miles *et al.* also missed the significance of the post–1900 changes in clerical employment in the US: the recording of data by this (new) army of clerks may mark this period as that of 'the information revolution'. For Don Lamberton this book suffers from the lack of an 'adequate theoretical and historical perspective'.

Thus, what Lamberton brings to his reviewing is a scholarly disposition. A scholar, steeped in the relevant literature, will give praise when it is due, and will then criticise when severe critique is applicable. Scholarly judgement is not subject to caprice or personal disposition: it comes from prior reading of the relevant literature, and reflection.

Modern universities are subject to various forces (from students, governments, etc.), and some of those pressures are inimical to the scholarly disposition discussed above. In fact, some recently recruited academics may well find some of the above discussion foreign, or strange, to their ears. In this wider context it is relevant to observe that, in the book review section of *Prometheus*, one can discern the baton of scholarship being nurtured, and passed to newer generations of scholars. *Vivant*!

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