A Watershed for Our Proceedings:
Thanking Arden Ogg, Managing editor, and
Chris Wolfart, Academic editor

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It is a pleasure to say a few words about the Algonquian Conference proceedings and their editors, some of it now ancient history. I have known Chris Wolfart since we were both graduate students, and giants roamed the earth – Floyd Lounsbury and John Honigmann, for instance. I might even think of our dissertations in terms of Chris doing Cree pre-verbs and I doing what may loosely be called Cree post-verbs.

This Algonquian research community was launched as the brainchild of Gordon Day, at a lakeside motel at St. Pierre de Wakefield. The first four of these almost-always-annual Algonquian conferences (1968-71) were quite casual (only a very few of you will recall Harold Hickerson’s utterly casual 1968 soliloquy), and papers were published only as some authors individually arranged for theirs.

William Cowan started our proceedings by collecting the conference papers to have them printed, with minimal editing, through the National Museum of Man’s program of Mercury Papers in Ethnology. Then, after publishing the 5th and 6th conferences, Bill Taylor abruptly cut the Ethnology Service’s budget. Not easily stymied, Cowan began printing the proceedings (starting with the 7th Conference, in 1975, published 1976) at Carleton University. After single-handedly providing us with nearly 20 volumes, Cowan retired from Carleton University and resigned the editorship in 1994. We owe Bill Cowan and Carleton University our great appreciation for providing two decades of our proceedings.

Godfathered (the term is apt) by Chris Wolfart, academic and financial support, organizational and editorial work moved to The University of Manitoba, under the titular academic editorship (that’s a technical term) of David Pentland from 1995 (26-31), John Nichols in 2000 (32), and, since the 2001 volume, Chris Wolfart. The associate or managing editor during the Manitoba period, from 1995 on, has been Arden C. Ogg. Her work added a new dimension. In an e-mail to me Chris put it in these words:

She ran the Papers/Actes for 13 years, from the first rough ms – and most were rough indeed -- to the polished book – and polished they were, each of them.

She was at her best, always, in treating each author as if he/she were the only one and had just produced a major work being readied for a festive launch. And despite occasional lapses, she managed the editors, too (no mean feat).

Her technical and organising skills (and her seemingly endless capacity for picking up the pieces and putting them back together) are justly legendary. But it may not be obvious to every reader (or author) that her work, the end product of which ultimately looks quite bland, reaches this high plateau of being barely noticeable (aspired to by all who design and typeset books) only because she has an extraordinary artistic sense when it comes to matters of typography and layout, of shape and design -- her aesthetic judgment is unerring.
At the same time she took a very active part in the running of the conference itself, from keeping the database of addresses and producing mailing labels to scheming about suitable venues for the next few years in advance. I suspect that many of the tasks she performed without anyone taking much notice will become more obvious over the next little while ...

The Algonquian Papers aside, Arden has of course also produced a substantial number of highly acclaimed books -- above all, critical editions of orally transmitted texts in a variety of languages, but also grammars and dictionaries and ordinary books -- which are indeed models of their kind.

It is during the tenure at Manitoba that the Papers of the Algonquian Conference became fully professional, with the painstakingly critical eye of Arden Ogg, supported by Pentland, Nichols, Wolfart, and increasing from 1995, external peer review support. These volumes are now at an intellectual level rather like an annual professional journal.

Editorial work on a volume of such broad intellectual scope demands sustaining one’s keen attention to the writer’s intentions, encouraging more work on clarity and excellence of exposition of worthwhile ideas, speaking with tact where a writer’s labours fail to articulate a cogent point, or inadvertently omits some prose, or fails to provide full referencing. At the other extreme, it may call for putting on a flak vest and moderating occasional excesses of tragically over-cultivated minds. Chris Wolfart has done a superb job of this; his editorship will be a tough act to follow. Most of us with editing experience can see the humour and appropriateness that Paul Radin once expressed, “Just because a writer is confused does not necessarily mean that he is struggling with problems.” But Algonquian Conference participants have been struggling with
problems and developing scholarly clarity for 40 years. Fortunately, we now have well over 500 published Algonquianist papers that have, with skilled editorial assistance, cleared the bar and engaged well-defined problems with well-defined success.

The most visible confusion we are struggling with at this moment arises from the decision by Richard Sigurdson, Dean of Arts at The University of Manitoba to cut funding for the Papers. Subsequently, and after many letters of support from Algonquianists, Emoke Szathmary, President of the University and herself a physical anthropologist who has done Algonquianist research, backed the Dean’s decision. My point here is not to slam the administrators, but rather to suggest their possible reasoning. I would add that during Szathmary’s years at McMaster, she was a cherished friend and colleague of mine. Sigurdson’s sense of his fiscal priorities and Szathmary’s support of her Dean can hardly be simply an appropriate response to the Papers, since the scholarly quality is at an all time high, the efficiency and effectiveness of Arden Ogg’s work is excellent, and the Algonquian Conference attracts an increasingly large number of attenders and presenters. And both historically and today, Manitoba is the locale of many Algonquian people. So why do we face the funding cuts at this point?

Perhaps our situation is comparable to the one 30 years ago when the National Museum withdrew funding. They had supported the Algonquian proceedings and also the proceedings of the first three congresses of the Canadian Ethnology Society, and abruptly cut this support for reasons apparently having little or nothing to do with the quality of the publications, and much to do with independent budget economizing factors at a more general-level of decision making within the National Museums Corporation. While we deeply appreciate the University of Manitoba’s considerable support of the Papers for so many years, we are surprised and saddened by this reversal of support policy. We may note,
however, that it is not only Algonquianists who are losing funding support. The Smithsonian Institution has terminated the project that published the Handbook of North American Indians series, with six of the volumes still unpublished. This, too, should concern us.

In sum, it is thanks to Chris’ leadership, Arden’s sustained high quality management and funding by the University of Manitoba Dean of Arts that we have for the past 13 years accumulated a published, accessible record of our developing intellectual understanding of a wide scope of matters pertaining to Algonquian speaking peoples. The Papers are a major resource for Algonquianists, whether students, faculty, or independent researchers. And the Papers have great potential for continuing to raise the level of both intellectual research and practical applications. We are grateful to have them, and very glad to know that the editorship is passing on into responsible, capable hands. We will be fortunate indeed if the new editorial arrangement can keep the ball rolling for another 13 years.