

The Art of Effective Commentary by Dame Alison MacDermot

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Commenting on heraldic submissions is one of the least-defined jobs in the SCA. Corpora says that the duty of the College of Arms is "registering and authenticating names and armorial devices," and to do this "has the right to call for documentation in the case of names, devices, or titles which are obscure or questionable, and to determine disputed issues of fact . . ." It does not specify how this is done.

What the College has done to meet this obligation is to set up a staff of intrepid irregulars, who offer advice to Laurel and do research ad hoc. Having been both a commentor and a submission herald myself, I know very well that Laurel's job would be impossible without the commentors - after all, Laurel processes about 400 submissions a month, which touch on many specialties in onomastics and heraldry. Even if Laurel had the expertise necessary to do good research in Japanese naming practices, German field divisions, rare charges, and everything else we deal with, the time to do so would still be lacking.

Therefore, Laurel asks the commentors to do as much research as they can, and then makes a decision based on what they find.

Besides, it's great fun. I assume you already know how to have fun; this article is intended to help you write useful and informative comments *while* you're having fun.

So what *is* the job of the commentor? There are three-and-a-half duties:

- **Fact checking.** Each LoI makes several assertions about names and armoury. If these aren't true, and it isn't caught, registrations or returns could be made in error. The other half of this job is finding out what the *true* facts are.
- **Consulting.** Often a submitter will ask for assistance on a particular matter (like "how do I say *red wolf* in Welsh?"). Commentors try to provide the answers to such questions.
- **Jury Duty.** Based on the evidence presented and accumulated, the commentor decides whether a device should pass or not. (Generally, silence implies consent to register, but it should be stated if the issue is controversial.) I make the jury analogy because the submissions herald, as judge, may always override or pass it on for Laurel's decision, but usually listens to the commentors.
- And the half-duty, **Education.** By sharing things learned during research, a commentor increases the total level of heraldic knowledge in the SCA.

What should a LoC contain?

A commentor "does his duty" in the Letter of Comment (LoC). [Note that such Letters have been rendered nearly obsolete by the Online System for Commentary And Response, OSCAR.] The most important part of an LoC is comments on current submissions. Some commentors include replies to others' comments, comments on submissions that have already been decided on, stray inclusions and cartoons, etc. I like the format:

- Greetings to the submissions herald, including the date. (You really need to date your letters; the College refers to letter by author and date, as in "Badger 3 Oct")
- List of LoI's discussed in the letter, in order by date.

- Comments on LoI's in order.
- Bibliography, as needed.

The comments themselves consist of several different things, all of which are intended to help the submissions herald do his or her job. These are:

Conflict Calls

The SCA has traditionally tried to prevent the names and devices adopted by its members from being too easily mistaken for those of other people (both SCA and real-world). The process of looking for too-close names and arms is called "checking for conflict." In the case of names, commentators scan the SCA Armorial and a few reference books for the names of significant real-world people. For devices, specialized books called "ordinaries", which are listings of arms arranged by what they look like, are checked. If a too-close match is found, a "conflict call" is made.

How to be effective: For names, give the potential conflict name in full, and (if it's a non-SCA person) explain why he or she is significant. For devices, blazon completely, then give the armiger and the source. I like to "count points" after that, both because it helps make my point and because I may prove to myself that something I thought was a conflict actually wasn't. It's a sort of mental proofreading.

Comments on Style

In the RfS [Editor's note: now replaced by SENA] are several rules that give a thumbnail sketch of what the SCA considers to be acceptable, registerable names and armoury. In general, they restrict submissions that are excessively complex, modern, or offensive.

How to be effective: Go easy on style comments at first; watch other commentators to see what gets a reaction and what doesn't. "I don't like it" is not a valid objection. Something like "The Irish and Chinese did not interact with each other in Period a name mixing the two shouldn't be registered" or "The koala bear was unfamiliar to Europeans throughout our period, as Australia was discovered in 1606; by Rule ..., it cannot be used" is much more like it. Supporting comments, like "this motif was used in at least 10 French coats in Period, for example ...; it should be acceptable" are also nice, because they serve as supplemental documentation for the submission. It is also acceptable to comment on unusual spellings and renditions; care should be taken not to go overboard, however.

Given that this is what's needed, what can you do to make yourself as effective as possible?

Play to your strengths

If you know a lot about a particular area (like Polish armoury or Scottish names), then by all means focus on that! You have information that the rest of the College doesn't. You can, of course, comment on areas outside your specialty. Many commenting groups have two or three specialists in different areas.

If you don't have a specialty, that's OK, but you might enjoy doing research in an area that interests you on the side. If you really get into it, you may suddenly look up one day to discover that you've become more knowledgeable on the topic than most CoA members. The flip side is that no one expects you to comment in an area where you're clueless. I, for example, know literally nothing about medieval Chinese naming practices. When a submission comes through with a Chinese name,, I

generally skim over it to check for any obvious misstatements of fact, but I almost never comment. I know that I cannot add anything of value. I take the time I have saved and apply it to commenting on something in my specialties. In the College, we have both generalists and specialists; at this writing, we have an "adjunct commentor" who works on only Russian names! I think this is a fine thing, so don't let unevenness in your knowledge scare you away from being a commentor.

Plug the holes (or, The Dutch Boy Herald)

If the submitter, the consulting herald, or the submissions herald asks a question, see if you can answer it. If you see a hole in someone's documentation, try to fill it. We are all backups for each other. It is also appropriate to ask a question about a submission, thereby pointing it out to others for special attention, although I try to do this only when I have exhausted my own resources trying to answer the question myself. It is less helpful to ask a bald question without trying to research it first; that simply shifts the burden of answering it to someone else.

For God's sake, document

If you can't cite a source for what you're saying, think three times before saying it at all. The worst trip-ups I've ever made happened because I thought I knew something, and didn't bother to check it. You still might be right, but you might not be - at least express it as "I believe this is so," rather than "I know this is so." If you're later proven wrong, the first form allows an "oh, I see I was mistaken"; the second only "something I knew just wasn't so." (And you will feel much worse if your error caused someone's submission to be bounced. Save yourself, and the poor submitter, the grief.)

Proofread

After you finish your LoC, put it away for at least 24 hours and look at it again. Make sure that the logic is clear, there aren't any typos and everything's been referenced.

Read your reviews

When the LoAR comes back, compare your comments to what was accepted and returned. This is valuable feedback to see if you missed a conflict call, or if you misunderstood a rule. This will help you make your commenting better. Some submissions heralds include quotes from the commenters when they are particularly relevant. This is a good chance to see what other commenters are thinking.

In short, keep in mind why we have commentors in the first place: to help the College of Arms do its job properly. Don't forget to have fun - after all, this is volunteer work - but be serious about doing a good job, too.

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