

# **Aliis Exterendum and beyond!**

*Vic Barnett.*

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Those of us who had the pleasure of hearing Adrian Smith give the closing talk at the RSS conference in Sheffield in September 1992 will surely recall, midst the fascinating historical anecdotes and detail, some discussion of the original Latin tag that was attached to the 'wheatsheaf badge' of what was then the Statistical Society of London. You will recall the form of this badge with its emblazoned quotation *Aliis Exterendum*.

The translation of the Latin tag ('to be threshed by others') was accepted as a good indication of the attitude of the Society at that time. In its prospectus it declared that the statistician should '*confine...attention rigorously to facts...stated numerically and arranged in tables*', and should '*exclude carefully all opinions*'. Clearly, it was not the statistician's job to do the threshing; this should be done by others.

Three interesting implications arise. Firstly, we see the stimulus as resting totally in *practical problems* (to yield the 'facts' or figures). Secondly, since opinions are eschewed, the statistician was not to interpret the data or infer from it (so much for inference or statistical theory!). Finally, data were to be processed only to the extent of tabular display. But even in 1834 the statistician was doing much more than this interpreting, theorising and displaying, in a variety of modes. Indeed it was less than 25 years later that the Society quietly dropped its Latin tag.

Thus, the mature Society, (now the Royal Statistical Society), was coming of age in a real sense, 'flexing it's muscles' and beginning to take on the responsibility of interpreting data and drawing inferences. Not that there was universal respect for such prospects. Indeed, as Farquhar and Farquhar remarked in 1891 '*getting information from a (statistical) table is like extracting sunlight from a cucumber*'.

What a shame the society made such a blunder in its formative years, and having 'sailed under false colours' had to abandon them so soon. But were the colours real or false? I have asked several friends of

mine, whom I regard as classical scholars and knowledgeable in Latin (they have been teaching Latin, or have Chairs in it!), what is meant by *Aliis Exterendum*.

'Well', they say, 'that is not very easy. Is it the ablative or the dative?...blah,blah,blah!' However, on considered judgement, they have all decided that the quotation means **to be threshed for others**.

This is fascinating, and an ultimate indictment of our Society. It got it right in the first place, seeing the job of the statistician as to interpret and infer. The only problem was the lack of Latin skills in the translators of the time, who declared the meaning of *Aliis Exterendum* as 'to be threshed by others.'

But we have many latin scholars amongst our fellows. What do *you* think?