1983

Booker T. Washington: The Labyrinth and the Thread

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I am living proof that an editor can be a biographer. Whether an editor should be a biographer, or vice versa, depends on the person and the subject. I cannot speak for everyone faced with that dilemma, but for me as editor and biographer the double life proved that much richer. As a biographer focusing on the thread of biographical narrative I had the advantage of collaborating with an editor, a co-editor, and a corporal’s guard of editorial researchers who explored the geography of the labyrinth—the historical context, the principal associates of my central figure, and even what Tom Clark called “the once-at-bat characters” in my story. Colleagues surrounded me who knew the meaningful—and sometimes the meaningless—details as well as I did. Academia these days is such a lonely crowd of specialists that it is a real pleasure to be in such a workshop. As a biographer, I could shed light on the behavior and unfolding character of my protagonist which the editing project could use and had to consider. Editors tend to assume that their own steady focus on the documents and their more exhaustive annotation research give them more complete and certain knowledge than any biographer. It is harder to be smug in that assumption when a biographer is in the house. He knows where the thread leads, which is also crucial knowledge.

It was biography rather than editing that I had in mind at first. While I was a graduate student doing research for my doctoral dissertation I got my first exciting look at the huge mound of Washington’s papers, recently acquired by the Library of Congress from Tuskegee Institute. It was a remarkable treasure of black history and American social history: more than a million items of correspondence, speeches, writings, inter-departmental memos, minutes of the faculty council, thirty-nine scrapbooks of newspaper clippings, and many items of dubious biographical importance, such as a daily report of the menu of students and faculty for twenty years, daily reports of the swine herd and poultry yard, a tomato label from the Tuskegee cannery, a package of dried beans from a black farmer, and a letter from Jesus Christ from his temporary headquarters in upstate New York—he said he wrote in English as it was the language of the Hebrews before the tower of Babel.

It was by far the largest record of any black individual in American history, and it still is so with the possible exception of Martin Luther King. Equally to the point, it revealed a much more complex character than historians had imagined, and opened a window through the veil that had always screened the private lives of blacks from white view. For the last twenty years of Washington’s life, he and his shrewd, faithful private secretary Emmett Scott saved every scrap of the record, apparently in the conviction that when it was all revealed, even including his dirty tricks, history would vindicate him. Despite my biography, or maybe because of it, the jury is still out on Booker T. Washington. But the biographer must be grateful for the sense of destiny or whatever motive that caused them to save everything, and also for the reasons, whatever they were, that caused those in charge of Tuskegee Institute in the 1940s to let the papers go to one of the great manuscript repositories.

It was more than ten years after the first glimpse before I returned to Booker T. Washington. Thereby hangs another long tale that I’ll forbear telling here, except to say that I spent nine years in cultural exile in a teachers’ college in a small Texas town that resembled Tuskegee. Having grown up in the Atlanta suburbs, I needed that long immersion in the rural South before I could have understood Washington’s experience and the outlook that grew out of that experience. I began serious work on a Washington biography in 1961, spending my retirement money one summer, then getting summer grants and finally a fellowship for a whole year, exploiting my wife as a research assistant, and digging away at the mound of evidence until I gradually distinguished the meaningful details from the trivia. I came to know the man I had been studying. All this was taking years, because although I was obsessed by my subject I was not driven. As my notes piled up, I began to realize that only a small part of the life and times of Booker T. Washington could be incorporated into the themes of a biography.
At this moment Oliver W. Holmes of the National Historical Publications Commission approached me with an invitation to edit Washington’s papers. He had his own reasons for the suggestion, stemming at least partly from a growing criticism of his federal agency from American historians who called for history “from the bottom up” and decried the elitism of the NHPC’s almost exclusive focus on the Founding Fathers. Bottoms-up history has been demanded more often than it has been written or edited over the past twenty years. But Ira Berlin’s Freedom History project, David Katzman and William Tuttle’s Plain People, and Thomas Frazier’s The Underside of American History are a few recent indications of an emerging history of the American people. At any rate, Dr. Holmes thought an edition of Washington’s papers would help move American historical editing away from concentration on the Great White Fathers. Of course, Washington was another elite character, one of the great black fathers of black history. Maybe I did not sufficiently clarify that fact for Dr. Holmes, for I was already thinking how an edition—a highly selective edition—of Washington’s papers would solve some of my dilemmas as a biographer.

Washington was a challenge to the biographer not merely because his private papers were so voluminous but because he was so complex, and it seemed to me in 1966 when I began the editing project that it would be a good showcase for illustrating this complexity. Washington was not complex the way I imagine an intellectual is, with most of the contradictions ultimately resolvable into some sort of unity, intellectual integrity, or consistent outlook. Maybe I have inaccurately idealized the intellectual by that description, but my purpose is to show what Washington was not. He was a man of action and a politician, not an intellectual, and he both despised and feared the black intellectuals of his day. His contradictions were unresolvable because they represented the various roles an all-purpose black leader had to play in white America.

Given such a complex character, and given the biographer’s obligation to tell the truth—the whole truth—about his subject, it seemed to me and still seems to me that one of the best ways to do it would be to present the documentary evidence, not merely cite the evidence. Publicly Washington acquiesced in the disfranchisement and segregation of blacks, whereas his private papers make clear that he initiated, guided, and secured financing for court cases challenging the grandfather clause, denial of jury service to blacks, Jim Crow railroad cars, peonage, and other forms of black subordination that he publicly accepted. He did all of this subversion of white supremacy in the deepest secrecy, and only a handful of intimates had any idea of it during his lifetime.

There was also a less attractive, more feral side to Washington’s secret life. He presented himself to the world in his autobiography and other writings and speeches as a social pacifist who turned the other cheek and adjured blacks to prepare themselves for future opportunities by self-improvement. In fact, most of his public utterances were grab bags of Sunday-school platitudes. In secret, however, he treated his black and white critics as enemies and used ruthless Machiavellian methods against them. He hired spies to infiltrate all the organizations of his opponents and not only forewarn him of their actions but serve as provocateurs and saboteurs of their plans. He bought black newspapers to sing his song, and publicly lied about it. He secretly hounded some of his more vulnerable opponents until they sought safety in obscurity. If I may

*Booker T. Washington speaking in Mound Bayou, Mississippi, 1912. (Photo by A. P. Bedou.)*
borrow Blake’s phrase, what better way to frame the fearful asymmetry of this tiger than an edition of his letters, with full but not exclusive attention to his secret life?

It would probably have been harder to edit Washington’s papers after completing the biography, because then the temptation would be hard to resist simply to select the documents that illustrated the interpretation and themes of the biography. I published the first volume of the biography simultaneously with the appearance of the first two volumes of the papers, and I deliberately avoided in that first volume any effort to say the final word on Washington’s character and personality. The editing project undoubtedly slowed the pace of the biography. Editing can be endless, laborious, and often downright boring work at times. My co-editor Ray Smock and I took turns reading aloud through the photocopies and typescript of every volume, and in the final reading of the galley proofs we had four people taking turns aloud. One pair of eyes was on the photocopy, one on the typescript, and two on the galleys. This may not have been mind-boggling, as I am sure many in the audience have done the same galley-slavery, but it was certainly mind-deadening. It was impossible to go home and write after a day of that.

So it took me ten years to write the first volume of the biography, and ten more years to write the second volume. It was easier to edit every day than to write every day, though neither is easy work, and it was also more necessary. The editing project was on released time and involved an obligation to staff members, to the university, and to the outside sponsoring agencies. I felt somehow more of an obligation to put out an edited volume every year than I felt about “doing my own thing.” I must confess that throughout both enterprises I thought of the editing as a team effort and the biography as my own. This is not to deny the help of Ray Smock and others on the biography, but simply to explain my mental compartmentalization of the two scholarly enterprises. What the editing did for me as a biographer was allow me a leisurely second look at all the evidence, and a chance to see what each bit of evidence signified not only to me but to my fellow editors. Every interpretive theme could be tried out on an informed and critical audience before it found its way into print in my biography.

The biography also benefited in interpretation and general tone from its long contact with editing. In Washington’s case it cannot be said that to comprehend all is to pardon all. His “dirty tricks” and his mealy-mouthed moderation in the face of racial injustice do not look any more attractive when thoroughly examined. But my original purpose was to write a much more detached, ironic, satirical biography. Sustained contact with the documents, and their fuller explanation of how Washington’s experience dictated the course he took, changed that approach somewhat. A biographer cannot understand his subject if he keeps him forever at arm’s length. The editing helped me to understand more and sit in judgment less. Now that it is all done, in spite of all my efforts I missed the quintessence of Booker T. Washington, the wizard of Tuskegee, but I believe that that is because he had no quintessence. His personality disappeared into the roles he played. So I end with a critical portrait of Washington, but I hope one that is more compassionate and understanding of a black leader born in slavery and flourishing during the age of segregation.

I think that obviously the work on the biography helped in the editing. I was always reading ahead, so to speak. At least, it helped me to win some arguments with Ray Smock about inclusion of one document or another, on the ground that the particular document was part of a chain of evidence on some facet of Washington’s life that would assume greater importance later. Comprehensive knowledge of Washington’s entire life was definitely a help in selection, the problem of which was magnified by the disparity between the million items in the collection and the less than ten thousand, or one percent, in the selection.

We have had no serious cause for regret about what we selected or what we omitted. It is true that one reviewer on two separate occasions faulted us for omission of favorite letters cited in my articles, arguing that “what ‘author’ Harlan finds significant enough to quote in his Washington monographs ‘editor’ Harlan should consider sufficiently significant to include in his Washington Papers.” Another reviewer also reproved us for omitting a document. The biographer of another black man, George H. White the Reconstruction politician, complained that we had omitted a letter that proved that his subject had significantly differed with Booker T. Washington’s conservative racial policies. What we found on rechecking the letter was that White agreed with Washington to the point of sycophancy, and we also concluded that we had been right to omit the letter as relatively insignificant.

Near the end of the project we decided to guard against errors of judgment in the selection process by going systematically through the scholarly books and articles touching on Booker T. Washington’s life and citing his papers, to see if we might have omitted significant documents. We found that we had omitted several hundred so cited. But when we checked these, we found that our original judgment in omitting them had been correct, for cause. Most of the omitted documents contained nothing significant not already in some included document. Often they were simply links in a chain of correspondence in which we had selected
the more informative or better stated letter. It is inevitable in a highly selective edition that only the meatiest of a series of letters will be published. In some thirty cases, on second or third thought, we have decided to include a formerly passed-over document. That is a good batting average, but it says more about the editorial process and Ray Smock’s insistence that we double-check and our editorial team’s ability to separate the wheat from the chaff than it says about a biographer being in the house.

The symbiosis of editing and writing on the Booker T. Washington project resulted in a lot more editorial self-restraint than has been true on some other projects. That is not to say that editorial restraint is universally appropriate. Maybe if Julian Boyd were also a Jefferson biographer he would have dealt differently with annotation, but since he was not, maybe his methods were right for him and his circumstances and his subject. Editing is an art, not a science, and we ought to avoid universal rules about the amount and kind of annotation that is suitable. If Boyd was not our model, we did have the example before us of a distinguished biographer and editor, Arthur Link, and more often than we have admitted before, when faced with an editorial quandary we turned to his volumes for guidance. Needless to say, he is responsible only for our virtues, not our editorial sins.

We wanted the edition to have a separate existence, rather than merely illustrating the biography or proving by amplification of the evidence that the biographer was right on all counts. We hoped, for example, that the edited volumes could treat subjects beyond the range or depth of the biography—such themes as industrial education at Tuskegee, the relationship between town and gown and between black schools and white philanthropy, the black politics of the era, black tenant farm life, and the life and concerns of the black bourgeoisie. We wanted to deal with these subjects without tendentious annotation or overinterpretation that would take its tone from Washington’s own social philosophy. Obviously, our selection process itself, taking one out of a hundred documents, was a form of interpretation, but we did not want to compound this by taking a monumental approach by which the documents would add up to a larger-than-life representation of Booker T. Washington. So we aimed at spare annotation, identifying or explaining the documents rather than exhausting the subject. As time passed, we found ourselves driven more than we intended toward the biographical by the very nature of the collection. Our resistance to this, however, our effort to study the labyrinth as well as follow the thread, we think helped us avoid an edition subservient to the biography. Of course, it helped also to be dealing with a historical figure who was often less than heroic.

I want to conclude by answering a few general questions that seem to arise out of the intertwining of biography and editing. Could another biographer come along now and do as well as I by looking only at our
thirteen volumes? The answer is no, because any biographer worth reading has to try to know and understand all he can about his character, how he acted as a key to what he thought and felt as history washed him along. On the other hand, our edited volumes discovered facets of Washington’s life that I did not know when I wrote the first volume of the biography, so the edition would be a good place to begin.

What are the audiences I see for the biography and the thirteen edited volumes, are they the same, different, or overlapping? To that I have to give the classic answer, that’s a good question. Obviously, they are not the same. In the present-day book market, people buy biographies and libraries—a relatively small number of libraries—buy editions. Furthermore, monographs are almost exclusive as products of graduate-school workshops, and most of the scholarly books published every year are these monographs evolving from graduate study. There is a powerful vested interest in the monograph as the primary form of scholarship recognized and approved by the scholarly professions. We may deplore this and hope to change it, but it is a fact. In my opinion, letterpress editions are most valuable in providing broad information for the student and teacher rather than as specialized research materials. I have faith, that in the long run, this type of service to scholarship and learning will gain in recognition, as documentary history rather than as an aid to history.

A related question is, which will be useful longer, the biography or the edition? I hate to have to answer this, because I feel a greater proprietary claim on the biography. More of my own art went into fashioning its image of Booker T. Washington. It is mine, whereas the edition is ours. Nevertheless, I believe any biography is a thing of its season. It is impossible to write a definitive biography of any historical figure as protean and deliberately deceptive as Washington. On the other hand, more than one generation will find meanings in the published documents that even we the editors did not see. If we editors do our work well and with fidelity, our work will be readable and will be read decades from now, while the monographs of today will collect dust like the leaves of yesteryear, their provocative interpretations ignored or merely points of departure for twenty-first-century perspectives.

To turn to a final question, you have often heard the expression, “If you could walk a mile in my shoes, you would understand and approve of what I have done.” My co-editor Ray Smock and I have often discussed the question—and let me take this opportunity to thank him for some of the better features of this paper. He may seek to hide behind his congressional immunity, but he cannot stop me from acknowledging his help. If we could have walked a mile in Washington’s shoes, maybe we would have suspended criticism. But we could never go more than half a mile before our feet hurt and our critical faculties returned. We found many cases of Washington being traduced by his enemies, but also found him vilifying his critics. Many contemporaries and later scholars stereotyped Washington contrary to the evidence we found, but we also found him a power-hungry political boss and a self-contradictory actor who could publicly say one thing and secretly do the opposite. His character was such that we could explain him without feeling an undue temptation to defend him.

These questions are intended to provoke discussion and stimulate other questions.