Confessions of a Deceitful Correspondent

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In evaluating personal correspondence, most editors must spend considerable time speculating on authorial intention and the responses of the women and men who were the intended audience for each letter. Tonight I shall discuss what may be learned from an archive of letters where little such informed guesswork is necessary. At least on my part.

The reason for such unusual certainty? The letters in question—nearly 400 ALS’s and TLS’s—are those that I wrote from various dormitory rooms at Barnard College in Manhattan to my parents in Elmira, New York, in the years from 1957 to 1961. It was only after my mother’s death that I discovered that the letters survived. And it was only last year, when I agreed to donate them to the Barnard College Archives, that I reviewed the documents closely.

The prospect of future scholars relying on your adolescent and post-adolescent letters home as documentary evidence of anything is, literally, a sobering thought. It’s all the more chastening for someone who pretends to know something about making such materials accessible as part of an editorial process.

What is most chilling is the realization that Letter Writers Lie. To be sure, anyone in the audience who feels shock or disbelief that a teenage girl (and an only child at that) might be less than forthright with her parents about her introduction to Manhattan grew up on a planet other than earth. Once I accepted the fact of my own dishonesty as a correspondent, however, a far more startling possibility arose. Perhaps I was not the only one. Perhaps each of us, in our personal letters, functions as those documents’ first editors.

Mary-Jo Kline, outgoing President of the Association for Documentary Editing, recently returned to the world of active editing as head of the Papers of John Jay, a project where she worked as a graduate student. In her later editorial career, she was Associate Editor of the Adams Papers and Editor of the Papers of Aaron Burr. More recently, she served as Sotheby’s Vice President in charge of sales of Printed and Manuscript Americana and American History Specialist for the Brown University Library.

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John Quincy Adams may have fibbed a bit in his letters. (Not in his Diary, of course, but that’s the topic of another Presidential Address.)

If this hypothesis is correct, what are its ramifications for documentary editors? Concrete examples served me better than theoretical speculation in the Guide to Documentary Editing, and I think they will be as useful here. Let me first examine what is real and honest about the letters—confirmed not only by my own memory, but also by the recollections of college classmates.

For this evening’s audience, I first combed the correspondence for hints that documentary editing might be in my future. It may be significant that the first boy whom I met during my week of freshman orientation—a young man who had been herded to a joint Barnard-Columbia freshman mixer (and, incidentally, the worst dancer I’ve ever met in my life)—was a Columbia faculty brat named David Syrett (letter of 18 September 1957). His father had recently taken leave from his teaching duties in the history department to begin editing the Hamilton papers. Thus I was introduced early to the idea that someone could earn a living by editing documents.

There are also embarrassing hints of a tendency to over-
annotate for my audience. On reporting a Marcel Marceau performance, I went to some pains to explain how this man could keep his audience enthralled for two hours with “no scenery, only a stool or a box for props—he made the stage what he wanted” (9 February 1958). My mother and father, after all, had grown up with the silent films of Chaplin and Keaton and knew the wonders of pantomime far better than I did. Like most adolescents, I had exaggerated notions of my parents’ ignorance, so this may have had no significance for my future career choice.

Let’s look at broader issues touched on in the letters. The most obvious are reminders of the inflationary spiral in the last forty years. At the beginning of each semester, I wrote my father with trepidation about my expenditures for books—usually amounting to $35 or $40. And there was occasionally a more ominous sign: “Well looks like we’ll have to get out the bankruptcy affidavits again to send to the Merit Scholarship Corporation. Barnard is raising tuition by $250 next year. That’s a total increase of $450 since I’ve been here!” (9 December 1959).

But researchers can trace the rise in the cost of living elsewhere. What do the letters report in reliable fashion about a college student’s life in Eisenhower’s second term?

First—Barnard students were hungry. We fantasized about food, and letters before vacations were filled with shamelessly detailed lists of menus that would be appreciated during a visit home “STEAK (I’m becoming an involuntary vegetarian) ... Pork and sauerkraut and dumplings Barbecued hamburgers Roast beef Apple pie Pecan pie Eggs—sausage Popcorn—with plenty of butter and salt Chicken cacciatore Milk—cold, hairless and waxless Pizza chow mein Good, warm, rolls softer than rock” (9 February 1958). The shipment of food from Elmira, New York, to the Barnard dormitories was a constant theme over the four years of my college career: “The CARE package was much appreciated—as will be any others you send” (27 October 1960). “Since finals are approaching ... cookies or other goodies from home would be greatly appreciated” (2 May 1959). And in response to an inquiry from my mother about what my roommate and I might like, a motto that still holds true: “Brownies are always good” (11 February 1960).

I gave my parents a scrupulously accurate record of plays and ballets and other performances I’d seen. Compared to other Barnard students of the day, I was only a mid-level theater-goer—neither as dedicated as the budding actresses nor as indifferent as some pre-meds. And the record proves the old saw that when we are young and poor, we take greater advantage of what New York City has to offer than we will at any other time in our lives. The first professional ballet performance I saw was Sadler’s Wells. The first O’Neill play that I saw was Long Day’s Journey into Night—its debut run with Fredric March, Florence Eldredge, and Jason Robards, Jr.; the first performance of Hamlet, that of the Old Vic.

The letters have some value in their portrayal of Barnard faculty and the course of study for an undergraduate of the day. Chilton Williamson, the professor who would become my adviser and good friend, told us that we’d be doing eight hours of reading a week for his course. Instead of protesting, I headed to Butler Library to charge out two books—only to find out they had been charged out to Williamson himself (27

I became the embodiment of a glutton for punishment. In my junior year I registered for a course at Barnard in Colonial and Revolutionary history. When my roommate signed up for Richard Morris’s graduate course in the same field, I went along to hear a lecture and liked it so well that I audited Morris’s course for the rest of the semester, thus clocking in two hours of seventeenth and eighteenth-century history a day. “But,” I admitted to my parents, “I really enjoy it” (18 February 1961). Barnard students of my time did work hard, and I recounted the details to my parents so religiously that I’m sure they had no trouble understanding this comment from a letter in my senior year: “Congratulations—you have just become a study break” (17 April 1961).

This was Columbia, after all, so there were reports of political activism. But not much. I studied in the library the night that Columbia and Barnard students staged a “Charley Van Doren” rally (5 November 1959). My senior year was marked by marches by Barnard students protesting a dictum forbidding us to wear slacks or Bermuda shorts when we crossed Broadway to attend classes at the main Columbia campus or use the university libraries there. Our cause, by the way, was triumphant.

Neither did I ignore the ever-changing face of New York City. I won’t pretend that I commented on it very intelligently, but then I wasn’t an art history major. One fine fall day I reported: “I took the bus uptown. It was a beautiful day and the trip took me up Fifth Avenue. A new Museum, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, is nearing completion at 90th St. When they started it last year, it looked like a bat­

But there were changes that I could report. Among them, the role of the opposite sex in my life. In high school, I simply didn’t date. I figured out early on that I wouldn’t get out of Elmira by being anyone’s steady girlfriend. Scholarships to good colleges didn’t come from going to proms or being a cheerleader. However, if my parents had been a little embarrassed by the absence of a boyfriend in my life earlier, they now had a chance to keep track of a changing cast of characters in my social life.

Like any girl who spent time in New York City, I had to remark on my increasing sophistication. Fixed up with a freshman in the fall of my sophomore year, I commented grandly: “He’s nice, good-looking, but young. I felt like a maiden aunt chaperoning him and his freshman companions” (2 October 1958). And when I received a letter that same week from a younger friend who had just started college, I remarked (with completely unconscious self-mockery): “It was unorganized and crazy—the kind of letter I wrote when I was a freshman” (31 October 1958). The same increasing worldliness can be seen in lists of gifts I suggested would be welcome for my birthday. My sophomore catalogue included (as God is my witness) “good white gloves” (13 October 1958). A year later, I sensed my need for “Black tights (you feel so Barnard when your legs are black all the way up)” (20 October 1959).

Politics were also an area where I felt I could admit to change. My father was a serious Republican, and it was years after my 21st birthday that I admitted to him that I’d registered as a Democrat. But he may have sensed what was to come when I wrote on the eve of the 1960 presidential election: “Saw Nixon-Kennedy debate. Hate to say it in the face of Father’s Republican sympathies, but Tricky Dick showed up as a fairly complete nothing” (13 October 1960).

What hadn’t I mentioned to my parents? A lot. The letters never reveal the fact that I started smoking. And, while I reported my roommates’ occasional overindulgence in hard liquor, I never admitted to more than two beers in the West End Bar myself (24 January 1960). Indeed, at first
glance, I feared that I'd sanitized my letters so completely that they were a total loss for useful research. Then I came across one written to my father in March 1959. As this was my second year at Barnard, I will not apologize for its sophomoric tone:

Now I realize that however much I dislike the food here, however tired and dirty I am, I was right in coming ... In the fifty odd years after I leave college, I must rely on all the thoughts and theories that have been thrown at me here. If I end up teaching history at some high school in Batavia, N.Y., or reasoning with Mau Maus in Tanzania [sic], I'll still be able to go back to the philosophies of John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, and Niccolo Machiavelli. ... -I won't need bridge games or TV. I'll have myself. ... (2 March 1959).

While Mill, Marx, and Machiavelli haven't been my companions of late, the substitution of names like Jay and Morris and Hamilton and Burr would mean that my prediction wasn't far from the mark. However, I never wrote a letter in this tone again. My father's hurt and puzzled reaction showed me that I'd misjudged my audience, and I quickly recalcitated—something that other letter-writers have done as well.

Let's return now to those “other letter-writers.” What lessons are there in this modest and unimportant group of letters for those who edit and analyze more significant archives of correspondence? They remind us that one group of documents—no matter how comprehensive it appears—is seldom, if ever, the only source needed to come close to the truth. My letters never approached that goal—they told as much or little as seemed appropriate to my audience, my parents. Letters to friends from the same period would reveal other parts of the truth. The memories of college friends and roommates could (and still can) supply vital corroborating evidence of truth and fiction, openness and concealment. And even at this late date, my own memory can provide a substantial part of that “contextual annotation.”

Documentary editors, however, seldom have such luxuries. Unless, of course, they are editing the papers of the Adams Family, where family correspondence, letters to friends or professional colleagues, and personal diaries often provide enough different elements of the “truth” in one individual’s life to give a certain degree of confidence in what truly happened—in what was really felt by the letter-writer or the people whom she or he describes.

Instead, we usually can hope to present readers with but a sample of the thousands of letters that a man or woman of another decade or century wrote and received in his or her lifetime. No other period or group of correspondents is so generously represented in my personal papers as the letters I wrote my parents in 1957–1961. It is typical in overrepresenting a certain span of years in a letter-writer’s life while leaving other decades underreported. And it is the rule, not the exception, for letters to certain friends or relatives to survive with greater frequency—thus exaggerating the distortions the writer chose for those audiences.

Thus the letters, diaries, and other “private” documents that we offer to our readers will not be an absolutely accurate and reliable historical record. And it is precisely this fact that justifies much of what we do as documentary editors. It is our responsibility and challenge to share with our readers the limitations as well as the opportunities for learning in the documents that we provide.

In line with this rule, my letters will go to Barnard College’s Archives with a brief introduction outlining family relationships, reminding any researchers who happen on the correspondence that teenage girls lie to their parents, and suggesting areas in which I, at least, was surprised to find myself telling the truth. The realization that I am not alone among dishonest letter-writers, means that I need donate the letters with only this explanation—there is no need for apologies.

Call for Nominations
The 2003 Lyman H. Butterfield Award

Since 1985, the Lyman H. Butterfield Award has been presented annually to an individual, project, or institution for recent contributions in the areas of documentary publication, teaching, and service. The award is granted in memory of Lyman Henry Butterfield, whose editing career included contributions to The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, the editing of the Adams Family Papers, and the publication of The Letters of Benjamin Rush.

The chair of the 2003 selection committee is Joseph R. McElrath. The deadline for nominations is 1 May 2003, and that for submission of supporting documentation is 1 June. Please send your nominations to him at Department of English, Florida State University, Tallahassee FL 32306-1580. For additional information, contact him at jmcelrath@eng. fsu.edu or 850-644-1522.