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The Best Job in the World: Documentary Editor

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Graduates of the Institute for the Editing of Historical Documents deserve congratulations, not only because they have learned a great deal but also because being a documentary editor is the best job in the world. I can speak of this with some authority. Although I am a 1981 graduate of the Institute, I officially became a documentary editor only after retiring from university teaching, which was my second career. My first was as a university press and textbook editor. Those were all good jobs, but documentary editing is the best. Here is why.

Editors get to know at least one interesting person really well, better than anyone except our subject's most intimate acquaintances and better than we will know any of our contemporaries except our closest friends. Why? Because we get to read their letters, diaries, and other personal papers. When people write in different genres and to different people, they disclose different aspects of themselves. I will use Louisa Catherine Adams, the wife of John Quincy Adams, as an example, but she is hardly unusual. She wrote several memoirs, which she expected other people to read—one for publication, to assert her Americanness and patriotism; two for her children, to explain and perhaps justify her life; and one to record the story of her life's greatest adventure. She wrote diaries, which she expected no one to read. She wrote letters to John and Abigail Adams, John Quincy Adams, and her brother Thomas Johnson, some of which she then copied as journal entries. She also wrote letters to her sons, to her daughters-in-law, to her grandchildren, and to other relatives, friends, and acquaintances. She is a different person in each set of writings, and no one but those of us at the Adams Papers has met all of those Louisas. I suspect that only her husband knew her as well as we do, and some days I have my doubts about him. No one knows Benjamin Franklin or Ralph Waldo Emerson as well as their editors. Or Margaret Sanger, or Thomas Edison, or Henry Laurens. This is a rare privilege—one that we extend to the world by publishing the documents. Yet even after

[1] This article is adapted from the author's commencement address at the 2010 Institute for the Editing of Historical Documents, Madison, Wisconsin.

publication, few people—if any—will read the documents as thoroughly or carefully as we have.

Other scholars come to the documents looking for something—in the worst case for evidence to bolster a preconceived theory, but in any case for *something*. The documents are a source, a tool, to be picked through and mined. Editors value the documents for themselves. We do not come to them with any notion of what they will tell us. We wait for that, and as we work we listen to what they have to say. All that matters is that they say something that is worth hearing. Our job is to make them heard and understood. That allows us to know our subjects as we know our closest friends: as they present themselves, as they are, non-judgmentally. Of course we like some folks better than others, but that does not affect the care with which we edit their writings.

Biographers, of course, come close to our practices—especially the best biographers. But unlike biographers, who must create a coherent narrative and interpret their subjects' lives, we are free to accept those lives in their complexity, contradiction, and incoherence. We have no need to fit them into a framework, find a pattern, or speculate about areas where evidence is lacking. We can take our subjects as they were, understand them as best we can, but stop short of trying to give their lives a shape or a meaning they may not have had. Editors develop a high tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty, and those editors who decide also to become biographers or interpretive historians are in a position to do this with unparalleled immersion in the documents.

Editors learn the true meaning and value of collaboration and teamwork. It is reassuring to know that there is someone behind you to catch your mistakes, improve your prose, and enlarge on your research. It is also ego-boosting to realize that you play that role for the other members of the editorial team. I spent nearly thirty years in an academic department consisting of forty-odd lone rangers. People would read your work if you asked them to, but none of them knew all that much about it and few took the time to do a good job of reading. Praise was certainly nice, but it did not mean that much. As one of the people who was frequently asked by my colleagues to read their completed or in-progress studies, I learned that most people really do not want to hear an honest appraisal of their work. As a book editor, I should have known that already. No matter how tactfully phrased, criticism is rarely welcome.

Not so on an editorial project. When I made a first pass at the annotation on the first section of Louisa's memoirs, I asked two colleagues to read my notes. I was not seeking praise. I wanted to know if I was on the right track, because if I was not it was better to find out early. When I finished the annotation for that section, I was glad that the three senior members of the staff read it critically, asked for more information, corrected mistakes, and improved the style, and that our newest staff member was verifying my work, because they all caught

errors, omissions, and failures of clarity that I would not have wanted the rest of the world to see. For the first time that I can remember, reading other people's criticisms was almost enjoyable, because everyone is helping everyone else, and we all share a goal—to publish the best edition possible. Criticism is not meant or taken personally. That rarely happens in the rest of the world.

Not everyone works on a large project where the kind of teamwork I am talking about is routine. Nevertheless, no graduate of the Editing Institute works alone. For one thing, their mentors at the Institute will always be figuratively looking over their shoulders. More basically, they have absorbed the standards and mores of the discipline. And more practically, they have (or soon will have) advisory boards who should help them to be as good at their jobs as they can be. Editors know the kinds of people who will be reading their grant proposals for the NHPRC and NEH and their manuscripts for university presses. They know whose standards they will be held to, and they have internalized those standards. Every editor has a sort of phantom editorial team lurking even in a solitary office.

Editors are expected to do excellent work. Now, the world is full of people who talk about excellence and take courses in how to achieve it. But they define excellence somewhat differently. In the corporate world, it means achieving greater market share or higher profits than the competition. In universities, it means increasing enrollment, generating more grants, and rising in the professorial ranks. It rarely means actually doing difficult, painstaking work very, very well. I am not talking about perfection, nor am I ignoring the fact that editors face deadlines and budgetary constraints. There is not enough time to track down every obscure person or room to write as much in a note as you know, even if that were worthwhile; there is not enough time or space to publish every valuable document. Yet the standards that editors set for their work—for accuracy, for evidence, for consistency—are extraordinarily high. Certainly they are higher than most other scholars set for themselves.

Let me again use the Adamses as examples. All of the Adams Papers have been microfilmed and are available in research libraries all over the world. John Quincy Adams's diaries—thousands of pages of them—are available free online as images. Any scholar working on a biography or history involving them has access to them. Yet, most people who have written about Louisa Adams and her marriage have consulted only her memoirs. They are the easiest to find and are relatively short. These writers have based their interpretations of her as a person, of her importance, and of her relationship with her husband on those memoirs. Most of them have not consulted his diaries or her letters.[2] If they had, they

[2] I make an exception here for Michael O'Brien, whose new book, *Mrs. Adams in Winter* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), is excellent, and for Margery Heffron, who is working on a biography. Both of them have spent considerable time in our office with the documents and the other resources the project has developed, and they have taken full advantage of them.

would have drawn different conclusions. In many cases, what they have written is just factually wrong, for Louisa was careless about dates and names, and they have not corrected her. They have not considered the context in which she wrote the memoirs or her state of mind at the time. They have not read the letters that she wrote when the events were fresh or the ones she wrote while she was drafting the memoirs. Their lapse is significant. No one reading John Quincy's diary on the days of Louisa's numerous miscarriages could dismiss him as an indifferent husband or an emotionless egotist. No one who had read Louisa's letters to her father-in-law or to her son Charles Francis could dismiss her as politically indifferent or naïve.

To some extent, we editors do not make the mistakes made by other historians because usually we do not interpret. But that is not the only reason. We read the documents with great attention to detail, and we let the documents provide us with our narrative. We read all of the documents. Several times. Carefully. Every word. Our colleagues do the same thing. Our mistakes are corrected before publication because we do not work alone.

Editors learn something every day. Most jobs have their fair share of drudgery, and documentary editing is no exception. Preparing an index is not an exciting experience for most of us, yet it is often at that late stage that we see and appreciate connections not made earlier. But most of what we do is challenging and interesting. When we are transcribing and proofreading, we are learning something from the documents. Annotation is a constant challenge, applying one's research skills, requiring an understanding of events, and testing our writing ability. Being able to summarize a major historical event in a few sentences without bias or distortion is a skill that benefits everyone. Managing a huge volume of material is an intellectual as well as a clerical challenge. Keeping track of genealogy and geography and politics, picking up very subtle clues, relating a small universe to the larger one—all of these challenges prevent boredom and perhaps early-onset dementia. I often find myself forced to understand events that I spent my formative years hoping would not be on the exam. Now they are, and they are generally not only not as bad as I feared but actually fascinating. Diplomatic history was always my personal bête noir, but if you are editing the papers of a diplomat's wife you just have to get over that, and when you do, understanding the complexities and nuances is thrilling.

There is gold at the end of the rainbow. Unfortunately, the gold is only figurative. When you teach, the end result is under your control in only a very limited way. You can be a superb teacher, possessing total mastery of your subject, an electrifying classroom presence, and an ability to address a wide range of students. But at the end of the semester, some students will have dropped out, some will have hated the class, some will have hated you, and some will

have learned very little indeed. If you teach graduate students, no matter how diligently you work with them, some will fail their comps and still more will never finish their theses and dissertations. Preparing a documentary edition is more like planting vegetables. Like the gardener in *The Fantasticks*, you know what you're about. If you plant a radish, you get a radish. If you do your job well, you get a great product. You have also created something that will last. I have published ten books. They have all gotten good reviews, and—by the relevant standards—most have sold well. But I doubt that any of them will have much of a shelf life. By contrast, documentary editions continue to have value for a very long time. Documentary editors leave a legacy by affecting scholarship for generations.

Not only do editors get to know wonderful dead people, we get to know wonderful living people. Editors are extraordinarily generous folks. I will not try to sort out cause and effect, but the necessity of collaboration has something to do with it. When you work on a team, you cannot hoard your knowledge and skills. But it is more than that. Every year, when editors apply to the NHPRC and NEH for grants, we are competing against one another. Yet, when grants are awarded, there is no crowing. Although the process is a zero-sum game, we want our colleagues to succeed along with us. We help each other in numerous ways, from sharing research to collaborating on fund raising and advocating for one another's projects. Most editorial teams are not as hierarchical as title pages would lead you to believe. You will notice at ADE meetings that project names appear on badges, but not titles or ranks.

From necessity, no one knows the events, actors, ideas, newspapers, books, and arts of a period better than a documentary editor. We write notes about everything from politics to agriculture, Latin sayings to circuses, theology to adultery, genealogy to geography. We know small stuff. Some of the notes in our editions give new meaning to the word *minutiae,* yet you cannot understand the documents unless you know these little bits, which really are necessary to explain a world that exists no longer. When Louisa says that her bedroom in Prussia had a list carpet, only by knowing that such a carpet was made from the end scraps of fabric can we make it clear that she is complaining about the meager living allowances given to American diplomats. We also know the large stuff: my husband once asked John P. Kaminski, the director of the Ratification of the Constitution project, what the Framers had in mind when they wrote the Second Amendment. Were they really talking about an individual's right to bear arms? Even in the short-answer version, it was clear that John knew every argument that had been made, by whom, and what we should make of it now.

Talking about John brings me to my last reason why documentary editing is the best job in the world. For 99.9 percent of the earth's population, time

travel is a science-fiction fantasy. For documentary editors, it is the day's routine. Despite his technological savvy and his frequent-flier miles, John spends a good part of his life in the eighteenth century. If you have ever heard him speak about that time, you might honestly believe he was there. He can transport himself over hundreds of years in a second with no special equipment. All editors are like that. Far more easily than anyone else, we can imagine ourselves in other worlds at other times. We can imagine ourselves into other minds. Sometimes, I think, Candace Falk is not sure whether she is Candace Falk or Emma Goldman. That is not a bad thing, unless she starts blowing things up or gets deported. One reason editors can do this is that we often choose our projects because of our own interests and commitments. Ann Gordon is a superb example of someone who combines matchless editorial skills with feminist commitment. Yet even those of us who end up on whatever project is hiring have extraordinary opportunities for learning and producing great work. Gary Moulton will happily give you a very long list of things he did not know about Lewis and Clark when he applied for the editorship, but you would never know it by reading his magnificent edition.

Institute graduates all set out in a field with uncertainties about editorial procedure, technology, funding, media, and other subjects. But there are certainties as well: That the work is valuable, that they will try hard to do it well, and that if they ever retire they will feel that their working life has been worth living.