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Butterfield Award Selection Committee

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Helen R. Deese Honored with the 2010 Lyman H. Butterfield Award

Ann D. Gordon



Ron Bosco presents the Lyman H. Butterfield Award to Helen Deese. Photo by Ray Smock.

The Lyman H. Butterfield Award is presented this year to Helen R. Deese. With this award the Association for Documentary Editing recognizes, first and foremost, Professor Deese's achievements as a scholar who works on both sides of our putative divide, producing acclaimed editions of both literary and historical texts. We also recognize her generous service to the Association over many years as a member of its committees and Council, a presenter at annual meetings, an author in *Documentary Editing*, and a thoughtful contributor to our ongoing discussions of editorial theory and practice.

Colleagues who nominated her for the Butterfield Award uniformly underscored, in the words of one, Helen's "enormous influence on the field of American Transcendentalism." She has wielded that influence chiefly through

two large and original enterprises: her massive *Jones Very: The Complete Poems*, published in 1993, and her ongoing edition of the journals of Caroline Healey Dall. A significant measure of Helen's intellectual generosity is that she has been equally successful editing the work of a somewhat mad and mystical poet and that of an astute, if cranky, observer of creative ferment.

Until her retirement, Helen spent two decades teaching at Tennessee Technological University, where she was an award-winning professor. Admittedly, not everyone thinks that teaching in Tennessee provides the best platform for editing topics and texts in Massachusetts! But working as a solo editor, she managed over many years to accomplish that difficult feat.

If you are not familiar with the Transcendentalist Jones Very, a quest for information produces a remarkable list of appositives: prophet, poet, madman, clergyman, classicist, mystic, and essayist. These multiple aspects of his personality presented challenges for an editor, as Helen's colleagues described for the committee. Wrote one:

A brilliant but possibly mad poet who believed that he was the medium through which the Holy Spirit dictated verse, Very utterly disregarded revision and form. Industry and tact were thus essential in preparing Professor Deese's massive volume of his poems.

In masterful understatement, another nominator described the challenge thus:

Prior to Deese's edition, Very's poetry had been highly copyedited because his editors doubted that Very's belief that his writings were inspired and often dictated by Christ, who guided his hand, made for a workable textual policy.

When Helen shifted her attention to another Massachusetts Transcendentalist, Caroline Healey Dall, she faced rather different challenges. So far, this project consists of a well-received popular edition, *Daughter of Boston: The Extraordinary Diary of a Nineteenth-Century Woman*, published in 2005, and the first volume of the *Selected Journals of Caroline Healey Dall, Volume 1: 1838-1855*, published in 2006. Further volumes are expected soon. Scholars and students turning to these books appreciate the elegant touch of Helen's annotation. Editors also prize her fine hand at selection. Dall's journals, continuous for nearly seventy-five years, are an invaluable source on nineteenth-century Boston culture and woman's rights. They look outward, providing through her youthful mind some of the best records of Margaret Fuller's conversations, and they have an unusual private dimension, as when they document the collapse of Dall's marriage.

Through her work on Dall, Helen has contributed to the ways editors think about and explain selectivity in their work. "I am acutely aware," she wrote

in the introduction to *Daughter of Boston*, “that readers are nearly completely at my mercy. Unless they go to the trouble of reading the entire text on microfilm, they can’t judge how fairly I have presented Dall’s text.” She warns readers about the kinds of power she exercised as editor: “determining which parts of the text readers will not see” and recovering passages Dall tried to cancel. With her readers well warned, however, she affirms that selection, like the rest of editing, is an art. “[T]he length of Dall’s complete journals,” she writes, “means that only a handful of scholars will ever read them in their entirety. Surely the solution to reducing their bulk is not to choose entries randomly or to include x number of pages per month or year.”

Finally, what many of us in this Association know about Helen R. Deese should be clearly stated as our grateful acknowledgement of her contributions to our lives and work. She is very generous with her research, answering the questions of students and editors with details and sources that she has not yet had the chance to publish. Her hand can be seen in other nineteenth-century literary and historical editions, just as her clear mind has been seen contributing to the governance of this Association and the leadership of other professional organizations. And no one can think of Helen without conjuring an image of a particular table in a particular corner of the room at our annual banquets, where she ranks as a senior and beaming member of the “rowdy table.”

**The 2010 Butterfield Award Selection Committee: Ann D. Gordon, chair;
Ronald A. Bosco, and Mary Hackett.**