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An Assessment of Recent Developments in Historical Editing

Jennifer E. Steenshorne

The American historical editing profession has a rich and varied history of publishing projects ranging from the collected papers of great men and women to diaries of relatively obscure individuals. However, one senses that as the profession enters the twenty-first century, as new technologies appear, and as boundaries between disciplines are blurred, the profession is at a loss as to where to place itself. This article is based on a survey of current projects, both in the United States and internationally, from a variety of disciplines, and in both traditional print and new media. My aim is to broaden our definition of historical editing and to encourage a dialogue among different kinds of projects. The current ongoing evolution of documentary editing spurred by the Internet raises a question: Is this a crisis or an opportunity?

The great variety in documentary editions can be seen in the projects represented in the two-session workshop panel, "Editing (and re-editing) Historical Texts," given at the 2009 annual meeting of the American Society for Eighteenth Century Studies. The theme of "editing and re(editing)" reflects the changes in standards, format, and audience. The projects represented editions of correspondence and letters (Don Nichol, "Of Politics and Poetry: Editing the Manuscripts of Sir Charles Hanbury Williams and John Wilkes"; Ivy Schweitzer, "A Digital Edition of the Letters of Samson Occom and His Circle"; and Norbert Schürer, "Old Writers, New Readers: Editing the Correspondence of Charlotte Lenox"), editions of already published works (Druann Domangue, "Where do I locate Original Impressions? Advice on Editing Eighteenth-Century Plays"; Beatrice Fink, "Editing Benjamin Constant's *Réflexions Sur Les Constitutions Et Les Garanties*"; and Paul Royster, "Digitally [Re]Publishing Franklin's 1734 Edition of James Anderson's *Constitutions of the Free-Masons*: Typographical Challenges and Unexpected Rewards"), new editions of older scholarly editions (Jennifer E. Steenshorne, "Editing and Re-Editing the *Selected Papers of John Jay*"), and editions aimed at a wider audience (Frank Shuffelton, "Editing an Ab-

sent Text: Jefferson's *Anas*").[1] The panel participants were able to transcend the seemingly different goals and natures of these projects and to talk to each other meaningfully about editing.

Despite reports of its demise, the letterpress edition still exists. A quick WorldCat search, using the key words "correspondence" or letters," reveals more than two hundred titles published in the last year (2008–2009) that could be classified as editions.

The traditional, comprehensive, long-term projects (like the papers of Washington, Adams, Jefferson, et al.) are still productive, though some have finished or are nearing completion. The newer projects (such as the *Papers of John Jay*) tend to be selected editions, focusing on the most important (or what the editors feel are the most important) documents and topics. This is the result of several factors: funding or the lack thereof, pressure to make certain kinds of documents available sooner rather than later, publishing costs, and the potential market. Publishers find it easier to market a single volume, especially if it can be used in the all-important textbook market. Other types of editions have emerged, including diaries and selected letters aimed at a more general reading public as well as an academic audience, and editions aimed at students. Of course, selected editions reveal the hand of the editor in a way that a comprehensive edition does not.

When we think of historical editions, we tend to think of the papers of Great Men or Great Women: political figures, activists, religious leaders, scientists, artists, inventors, and writers. We also think of the institutional records of governments and courts. While this subject matter may be seen as traditional, these editions are now no longer limited to correspondence, diaries, and draft essays. The increasing number of editions coming from the field of the history of science includes notebooks, lab notes, sketches, and other non-traditional textual materials in their editions. These materials provide a whole new set of challenges for the editor.

Diaries and letters of the less well known are also proliferating. Of particular interest to general readers are those of participants in wars, particularly the Civil War, westward expansion, and the wars of the twentieth century. I call this the "Ken Burns" effect.

The push for document-based curricula in primary, secondary, and college-level education has been another source of innovative editions. For example, the use of documents is a mandatory part of the New York State curriculum, and document-based questions are part of the Regents exams (beginning in the Fifth

[1] http://asecs.press.jhu.edu/2009%20Program.pdf : pp. 52, 56

Grade) in social studies and history. Textbook publishers have been quick to respond to this. Even traditional textbooks are now including documents in support of the narrative text. Bedford/St. Martin's has made a specialty of this kind of textbook, publishing short histories with supporting documents, as well readers that cover broader topics. These collections vary greatly in quality, as anyone who has taught with them can attest. Many "documents" are mere excerpts aimed at students with a limited attention span. Even complete documents are often presented with no explanation as to what the document is, how it was transcribed, or its source.

Fewer comprehensive editions, then, are being produced. Selected editions have become the norm. Diaries and letters of "regular" people have increased in number and are marketed to a broader audience. Documentary editions have begun to serve another growth market, document-based pedagogy, and vary greatly in quality. Editions in the history of science include new kinds of documents innovatively presented.

Obviously, the biggest change in the profession is the enormous demand for digital projects and their proliferation, which has been the subject of ongoing debate. Digitization, of course, is now a fact of life. Increasingly, letterpress editions are being digitized, either as complete editions or mini-editions. This includes the digitization of older editions, some from the nineteenth century. "Completed" projects have gained a new life in digital form. "Born digital" projects are increasing. Formats range from single volumes of diaries or letters, to digital projects that include transcriptions, annotations, document images, visual materials, and curriculum guides. People involved in projects include full-time editors, faculty members, graduate students, archivists, local historians, and interested amateurs, as well as an increasing group of technical staff.

This is due to a number of factors. Funding agencies encourage projects with a digital component. For example, the text of the NEH Scholarly Editions and Translations grant application states, "While grants may be used to support works in print, the NEH encourages applications that provide for online access."[2] It is less expensive to "publish" a digital edition. These factors have affected what types of projects have emerged and who is mounting them (including people who do not identify themselves as "editors").

Recently, the profession has come under scrutiny from groups such as the Pew Charitable Trust, the National Archives, and, of course, Congress. The details of this controversy are familiar. In brief, there is a concern that the scrupulous editorial method used by the Founding Fathers projects (for that is the group of papers targeted) has slowed publication and thereby prevented the American

[2] http://www.neh.gov/grants/guidelines/editions.html#final

Public from gaining access to their patrimony. In response to this "crisis," the National Archives and Records Administration published a report, "The Founders Online: Open Access to the Papers of America's Founding Era. A Report to Congress," which recommends publishing raw documents on the Web (using one central provider to do markup, etc.) and the standardization of texts across projects, with corrections and annotations done later. The authors of the report recognize that document images alone will not suffice, that the public needs transcriptions,[3] but they believe less processed transcriptions are adequate for most of the public's needs. Most editors and many other scholars disagree. The debate reveals the fissure between funding agencies, foundations, and some popular historians who want immediate online access to documents and scholars who believe that the editorial process is a necessary guide to the full understanding of these documents. It also reveals a desire or even a hunger for certain kinds of documents, which explains in part much of what is now being put up on the Web.

Another related development is the rise of the electronic archive. Many new projects are hybrids of editions (in the traditional sense) and archives, combining transcriptions (with various levels of editing) and images of documents. These hybrids can enable projects to mount more documents and to concentrate more resources and time on selected documents, indices, and search engines. These projects also raise the question of whether it is better to make a bad transcription available to the public quickly or to mount a beautiful digital image of the document, with full metadata and searchable abstracts. (Of course, many manuscripts are so difficult to read that they are not usable by the general public or even by many scholars, who are unwilling to devote the time needed to transcribe them.) There are also issues of standards, both in coding and editing, especially as the archival profession has begun to formulate its own standards that may be at odds with those of the editorial profession.

Many projects now include curriculum guides or teacher resource materials. Other collections of documents (with and without guides) are coming out of archives (the Library of Congress, the National Archives, great historical societies in Massachusetts and Wisconsin, etc.) and universities. Often this is done in conjunction with educators and scholarly editors, but more often without thought, care, or provenance. Even the Avalon Project at Yale Law School mounts materials that come from mysterious and un-vetted sources. Of course, pretty much anyone can put up a set of documents purporting to be accurate, but users may not have the skills to evaluate this material.

Projects such as Making of America (based at Cornell and the University of Michigan) and, most importantly, Google Books, that digitize older books

[3] http://www.archives.gov/nhprc/publications/founders-report.pdf

containing invaluable documents have created another problem. Some of these editions were published as early as the nineteenth century. While these can be great resources, the texts are provided without context. For example, William Jay's biography of his father John Jay (1833) and Henry Johnston's *Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay* (1893) are now available on Google Books. Both works silently expunged much material from documents, corrected grammar, and, generally speaking, tidied up the texts. Yet scholars continue to use these editions, presumably at least somewhat aware that the transcriptions are defective. But once these editions are online, the general public uses them more readily, without any idea that these changes have been made in the transcriptions.

Print editions no longer necessarily terminate when the final volume is published. Older editions can be digitized, and new material can be added to them. For example, the *Robert Boyle Project*, under the direction of Michael Hunter, is an ongoing project that combines the print edition with archival materials, images, and transcripts.[4] Rotunda, based at the University of Virginia Press, brings together the existing and future volumes of the papers of Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Hamilton, Jay, and Jackson, and the Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution, among others in the American Founding Era collection, in a form that will eventually be cross-searchable.[5] One of the results of the new digital age of editing is an increase in the number of people involved in editing projects who may not self-identify as editors, but rather see these projects as an extension of their other scholarly or archival work. The positive aspect of this trend is that more scholars are engaging in documentary editing. The downside is that people may be leaping into projects without much thought or skill in editing. The digital age has also increased the need for technical support staff on projects. Organizations such as the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) and Documents Compass (based at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities) have been formed to set standards, provide expertise, and act as facilitators for projects. These organizations are well known within the editing community, but it is not clear if non-editors are aware of their services.

Clearly, the definition of historical editing has vastly expanded, along with the number and types of projects, and the number of people involved in those projects. Is this a crisis or an opportunity? The editorial profession should see this as an opportunity, must be proactive, reach out, offer our expertise, and seek out the expertise of others, as we embrace this evolution in the field.

[4] http://www.bbk.ac.uk/boyle/

[5] http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/index.php?page_id=Founding%20Era%20Collection