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Bowers, Fredson, "The Education of Editors" (1980). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. Paper 149.

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The Education of Editors

FREDSON BOWERS*

Ever since the pre-meeting of this organization that I attended in Lawrence, Kansas, the association of historian-editors and of literature-editors has seemed to me to be an auspicious one. Each of our sides has a chance to discuss its own special disciplinary problems in a necessary and useful manner, but always with the consciousness that we are also talking to a similarly oriented group, though in another field. However, in addition, I note that some programming has deliberately fostered what it may be pompous to call "cross-fertilization" but what at least offers the opportunity to survey the one discipline's general theories, as well as its particular problems of methodology, by comment from the other side. This programming must serve as my excuse for speaking today. No one could be more ignorant than I of the inner workings of the large-scale historical projects in which the interest of the historians of this organization concentrates. Yet as the editor of the complete works of some six authors in four different centuries, several of which run to ten or more closely packed volumes, I have acquired some notions about the function of literary and philosophical editing in the graduate training of our universities; and I hope that this background qualifies me to take a more outside view of Messrs. Prince and Burke's two most cogent papers than might have been obtained by using an historian-commentator who could have been too close to the trees. In this case, only the forest looms to my near-sighted vision.

Let me try to approach the matter from the point of view of a student of literature. The first difficulty I faced in reading these papers was a semantic one, caused within the discussion by the firm division of teachers from research scholars, specifically from editors and perhaps some archivists. For many years the departments of English have been struggling with the problem of teaching versus research; but for us this question has been only of where to place the emphasis within the teaching profession. Perhaps too readily we have been led to believe that a Ph.D. in English had no commercial value and little possibility of

professional application save in the field of teaching. (The M.A. is quite a different matter.) Thus the relation of teachers to researchers has been one only of emphasis within the faculty itself. We are all teachers. Many of us are professed researchers as well, and some of us actually produce the goods.

To us, therefore, it is an unusual concept that graduate work in history has a double-tracked roadbed that on the one hand points toward producing teachers (meaning active members of university faculties of history) but also historians called researchers (meaning persons, including documentary editors, who earn their livelihood by the sweat of their brows performing duties that are not necessarily associated with a university and its history faculty except in some projects for convenience). This split in functions, which seems to be taken for granted as pretty much of an absolute, according to my interpretation of the two papers just read, has important consequences that lead directly to the problems that Messrs. Prince and Burke have attacked. As usual, the root of all good, as well as of evil, is money. The historical research performed as a normal part of the function of a teaching faculty is subsidized by the university basically in the salaries paid, but also in the form of superior increments and more rapid promotion as rewards, as well as in occasional time released from teaching for specified research. The professional historian-researcher has no such lifeline. His salary must come from funds generated by the federal or state governments, aided by foundations. As Professor Prince has pointed out, academic tenure does not usually apply to the researcher, and it is inevitable that ultimately he will research himself out of a job.

The question that arises very strongly in my mind—as it has in Professor Prince's and as it is certainly one reflected in the series of questions with which Dr. Burke ends his paper—the question is whether training for such full-time nonfaculty research professionals, who are largely responsible for editorial projects in history, whether such training is justified by a dwindling market for the product. Latent in this question is, of course, the willingness of history departments to devote their valuable graduate resources to training persons for a limited future prospect apart from teaching, in contrast, say, to the training of the more numerous practitioners of so-called public history or other nonacademic historians who have a place in the economic world. The answer would seem to be that the time and expense of this specialized editorial training for such a use is likely *not* going to be justified, on the whole. To repeat, when researchers are not fully tenured members

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of a university, or on a so-called tenure track, the only source for their salaries is government and foundation funds, with a few public benefactions mixed in. Here the handwriting seems to be on the wall, for, as usual, foundations are being the first to pull out of long-term support for nonscientific research and publication. Even continuing historical projects may be feeling the pinch, and new proposals are being met with a lack of financial enthusiasm. Secondly, the federal government—long suffering as it is—has this in common with foundations that its agencies, like National Endowment for the Humanities, prefer a turnover in projects within a relatively short time. NEH has already severely cut funds for continuing large-scale editorial projects in English and philosophy, and I suspect that support will become increasingly difficult for any massive new editorial project that would tap the Endowment's funds for a period of years. The lure of a larger number of short-term editorial projects, with their political and geographical variety, will prove to be too great. Thus financial support for the professional historian-researcher is becoming increasingly problematic.

There are other discouraging aspects that tie in. Among these is the question of who in the future will pay for the *publication* of large multivolumed editions. The strain these editions impose on the capital structure, to say nothing of the cash flow, of a university press is extreme, and of course few commercial publishing houses would have any reason to be interested in such loss-leaders. I do not have the facts, but I wonder how many of the historical editions we have in being are published without subsidy, if any. I believe I am correct in the statement that so far every multivolumed edition of the complete works of an American-literature author is still in the red when publication subsidy is not figured in. We all have experience with the fact that foundations are notoriously reluctant to provide publication money. Will the federal or the state governments continue in the future to back publication costs for mushrooming series of editions, the price soaring each year? Secondly, the question arises of the law of diminishing returns. Have the major figures and subjects been pretty well covered? Are many *outstanding* historical figures of prime interest to scholars still to do? Will funds remain available when projects in the future begin to descend the stepladder of importance?

My own suggestion is by no means unique, but it may come with some force, since what has worked for literature should also work for history. Given my academic background I have been really perturbed by the dichotomy that in these two papers seems to have been taken for granted that faculty teachers and professional editor-researchers represent two strictly separate vocations. I am not talking now about the training of archivists, which I suppose may correspond roughly to the training of a rare-book or manuscript librarian for literature. I gather that the M.A.

degree is customary for archivists, although I am always minded of the case of Dr. William Bond, director of the Houghton Library at Harvard, who, knowing from the start that he wanted to become a rare-book librarian, took a Ph.D. in English as his first step.

When we come to the training of documentary editors, it seems that history departments think in terms of nonteaching professionals who will be engaged full-time by some editing project after the award of the M.A. or Ph.D. On this matter I take whatever stand is possible. The prognosis for the future is that although there will always be a limited demand for researcher services, the careers of the young men and women now starting out are likely to be shaky ones, with little security; and indeed Professor Prince has stated that for this reason he now declines to train students for placement in such an uncertain career as that of historical editor. If this is true, and it certainly appears to be, the solution—it seems to me—calls for a more radical approach than that envisaged either by Professor Prince or Dr. Burke. Each, I would say, has been thinking in terms of the way in which present large-scale editing projects have grown up, shaped more by occasional and pragmatic than by theoretical considerations. That is, most have been started and supervised by a prominent member of the teaching faculty, not always with specific training in editing. Graduate students in process of studying for their degrees have been subsidized by being attached to the project occasionally, but they have often proved unstable, on the whole, and not to the highest degree efficient. Thus the emphasis has been on assembling a full-time cadre of professionals (I omit my own preference for faculty wives) content to make a career of working with editorial projects. Whether some of these have been putative teachers who could not find jobs is really irrelevant for the purposes of this discussion. There is nothing shameful in their position, if so, and it may be that teaching opportunities will eventually show up. Such a staff of professionals, it is true, promotes the greatest efficiency, although at considerable expense; but, as remarked, many carry within themselves the self-destructive time mechanism of the project's completion.

What I now query is whether this staffing, which has largely been taken for granted, needs adjustment in view of future conditions. The heart of the matter is whether future editors should be grouped in their training as one compartment of the Ph.D. system aimed at producing nonteaching historians. Instead, it seems to me, in cooperation with the sponsoring university the junior editorial staff should include the maximum numbers drawn from the teaching faculty or especially hired in a dual capacity. Every professor in a university (as distinct from a college) is supposed to be active in productive research. For those with the requisite temperament and skills, let documentary editing be their special field of research to go along with their teaching. Indeed, such

persons need by no means be such tearing specialists that they could be permitted to teach only more documentary research and archivism. The whole spectrum of liberal course offerings should be thrown open to them, for many will be equipped to teach conventional courses whether multidisciplinary or fractionated: in the house of editing there are many mansions and many skills other than a special capacity to deal minutely with single documents.

If this transfer of documentary-research activities back to the history faculty is to be successful, something of a revolution will be needed not only in the hiring of faculty members, some of them, perhaps, but not necessarily, part-time and with assorted duties within the department depending upon their special capabilities. The revolution will need to extend to the graduate programs. It is not enough to offer a one- or even a two-semester course in documentary research. Such an optional course must, naturally, be added to the graduate program for those who want it, and perhaps even a semester should be required of everybody, in the old-fashioned manner of graduate training. But otherwise it is important that the graduate student be given the usual well-rounded course instruction and take the usual well-rounded Ph.D. preliminary examination like any other of his fellows. The real innovation, however, is the need to lead history faculties to accept documentary research as a normal and valued area of specialization suitable for the dissertation. Julian Boyd's *Susquehanna Company Papers* should have been his dissertation. He should not have felt he had to drop out of graduate work. This transition has already been made by some English departments in this country and in England, whereby a strictly bibliographical or textual-editorial dissertation is accepted, provided a sound general introduction on the subject matter accompanies the technical investigation or compilation. A history dissertation, therefore, needs to be accepted that may involve the editing of some series of documents, the effort to be judged in part on its grasp of editorial theory and practice, and in part on the historical value of the introduction that surveys the material as history and not merely as a collection of pieces of inscribed paper. The resulting Ph.D. candidate will have all the broad knowledge needed for a normal teaching job, but he will also have at least the beginnings of the specialized knowledge that will make him uniquely useful if hired by a university to spend his time with the teaching faculty and the editorial project in hand there. His knowledge of documents can give him a special authority in the teaching of history as history, while at the same time his wider general background to that of the technician can make him of superior value within the editorial project.

An old saw in literature instruction runs that those who can't write, teach; to which prejudiced observers have been tempted to add—and those who can't teach, edit, the suggestion being that if one fails as a creative teacher and

scholar one can at least always earn one's keep as a useful drudge. There is no time, nor is this the proper occasion, to defend the dignity of editorial work. But it is only realistic to acknowledge that not all casts of mind and not all temperaments are suited to editorial research, production, and the tasks accompanying its publication. However, this is as natural as to say that not all historians are suited to be medievalists, let us say, or classicists, or orientalist, or whatever. So long as departments of history regard historical editing as a low-level occupation, not to be mixed with the duties of an active and normally trained teacher who is on the tenure track, so long will the day be delayed when documentary editing becomes an integral part of the academic establishment instead of being pushed off into left field not as an acceptable research discipline for a rising young academic scholar but instead as suited best for non-teaching technicians, a special compartment in the large assemblage of historians who ply their trades of various kinds outside of academia.

What Professor Prince has to say about the need to train professional editors to higher standards and then to do what is possible to secure them a succession of appropriate jobs is all very true. But I think he reflects the generally conservative views of history departments when he takes it that "not all new projects should be or are going to be carried out only by tenured faculty with or without editing experience, aided by graduate students who presumably will go on to teaching careers." On the contrary, given the experience of English departments with something close to the same problem, I can see little other future for historical editing on its present scale and expensiveness of staff than to return it to the academic establishment where it can be at least partially subsidized by teaching salaries. If departments of history will respond to the obvious pressures of the future, and as demand develops train aspiring editors as teaching historians but with a specialty in editing, the staffing of editing projects would be altered in various important respects by this leaven of faculty in some positions formerly held by expensive professionals. The stability of the projects and the financial problems, while far from solved, would be materially alleviated. And the reduced need for a special class of professional editors would help to offset the pressures that Professor Prince and Dr. Burke see for the future. It seems to me to be an improvement if Dr. Burke's concern whether "students are being trained in documentary editing to enhance their chances in the job market, when in fact the training should be aimed at simply improving their skills as polished historical scholars," if this concern were to be transferred, instead, to a worry that too *many* graduate students were opting for a Ph.D. with a specialty in editing because they thought it would improve their chances in being hired as *teachers* by history departments. The present glut of Ph.D.s, it is true, may put this transfer into the future when the turn comes and a sellers' market develops.

However, I suggest that temporary economic conditions, which have paralyzed many departmental initiatives, should not obscure the possibility of *beginning* the shift in departmental thinking that is needed to provide a home for these teachers with a special competence in editorial research and production. I grant that the problems are not identical, but precisely this shift has occurred in some departments of English with which I am acquainted, in

which young scholars with full training in literature but with a specialty in bibliography and text are welcomed, and even sought after, for their ability to teach literature while publishing valuable research in textual criticism and the like, and working in their normal research time, or in specially released time to replace a course or two, on editorial projects in which the university is interested. If in English, why not in history?