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John Y. Simon

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

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Editors and Critics

JOHN Y. SIMON*

In the beginning, Boyd created volume 1 of *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, at least so far as modern American historical editing is concerned. No other editorial production in this country had won such immediate scholarly acclaim or had such wide-ranging consequences. Today we still feel the reverberations of this 1950 event, primarily because President Harry S. Truman's enthusiasm for Julian P. Boyd's achievement led to the strengthening of the National Historical Publications Commission.

The revitalized commission, encountering an era of expansionism in universities and scholarly agencies, when money was available and prestige a desirable goal, spawned a host of editions inspired by the *Jefferson*. Commission sponsorship encouraged public and private support necessary to launch these undertakings, and the availability of limited grant funding beginning in 1964 through the NHPC itself apparently provided the stability needed to insure the completion of comprehensive editions based upon the best available scholarship. Gradually the commission found itself the leading patron of long-term multivolume compilations that no other funding agency could or would see through to completion. Foundations, institutions and agencies might share the commission view of the significance of the projects but lacked the capacity or willingness to make commitments for so many years. Appreciation of the commission projects permeated the historical community. Reviews of the volumes were almost uniformly laudatory, if naive, but what editor could complain of a chorus of praise for his work, even when hosannas were lifted from the dust jacket?

Twenty years of fairly steady applause were followed by a decade during which historical editing received an increasing amount of unfavorable academic criticism. I propose to review a portion of this criticism, concentrating on the part that has general application to this field, drawing on only a few criticisms of individual volumes or projects when the comments appear to have more general implications.

Indeed, we appear to have entered a period of open season on historical editing. The review section of any major historical journal may contain enthusiastic praise of a four-hundred-page monograph that

seeks to establish that the Hay-Pauncefote treaty was far more important than any of us dreamed, acclaim for a book that asserts either that women were oppressed in Peoria or Norwegians in Milwaukee, and considerable fault-finding with the latest volume of the papers of Benjamin Franklin or of John C. Calhoun. One recent article surveying commission projects consisted almost entirely of an anthology of unfavorable reviews, buttressed with the obligatory academic caveats from favorable reviews.¹

After some preliminary skirmishing in journals, the battle had opened in 1971 with Jesse Lemisch's complaint about the proliferation of the papers of "Great White Men."² Reflecting the concerns of the 1960s, Lemisch complained that the projects sponsored by the NHPC failed to meet the need for history written "from the bottom up" and further failed to uncover the roots of American radicalism, a deficiency easily remedied by scrapping the papers of the Founding Fathers and diverting the scholarly and financial resources to editions of the diaries of ordinary seamen during the American Revolution. Proponents of historical editing had drawn freely on conventional patriotic rhetoric during the honeymoon period to justify the preparation of scholarly monuments to great Americans. Some of these statements proved embarrassing to historical editing during the Vietnam and Nixon years. In any case, broad generalizations about the nature of the American past were largely irrelevant to the work of editors themselves, involved in assembling, not manipulating, a documentary record. Although the editions did focus on extraordinary Americans, the incorporation of incoming correspondence opened windows on the lives of many of their obscure countrymen, previously ignored or unknown. Editors often exaggerated their own detachment from the documents or failed to realize the incorporation of their values in annotations, but no major edition deserved to be labelled tendentious.

Lemisch set the tone for much of what followed. In calling for a radical redirection of historical editing, he ignored the mandate and nature of the commission. Although the commission had earlier created a few editorial projects, intending to supply complete support, those dealt exclusively with the formation of the federal government. Other projects it endorsed or funded had emerged in partnership with other institutions. On the whole, commission projects reflected what historians wanted to edit and what

* John Y. Simon delivered this address as outgoing president of the Association for Documentary Editing at the third annual meeting in Madison, Wisconsin, in October.

institutions were willing to support. As the commission developed a large and diverse family of projects, the need for matching funds provided an effective form of birth control.

Lemisch's salvo coincided with the opening of a depression decade for professional historians. Years of expanding college enrollments had been overmatched in history departments eager to train new historians. The plight of unemployed historians suggested to their mentors the desirability of government-financed historical projects for historians, but not those currently underway, for which new holders of the doctorate might be ill prepared or which were already fully staffed. If only commission funds could be redirected, they thought, something socially useful might be accomplished. "It is a pity," complained one reviewer, "that in the present hard times the money and talent devoted to these often trivial documents are not freed to produce history more directly and more profitably." "I believe that money spent on such projects," he continued, "could be better spent on microfilm editions of collections and on research support for articles, monographs, and books of broad synthesis and interpretation."³ Another critic suggested, apparently seriously, that commission funds could be better employed in compiling oral histories of retired railroad workers.⁴

The idea that current documentary projects were expensive permeated much of the criticism directed against them, though few stopped to consider the basis for comparison. Editors bore the burden of scrutiny of their budgets for the expenditure of public funds when most other scholars did not. Computations of the cost of each volume of documents could have been balanced against the real cost of books written by tenured professors employed to devote part of their time to research; these statistics might be more impressive by including their less productive colleagues. James Ford Rhodes was, characteristically, the first American historian I know of who commented on the high cost of writing history;⁵ hiding the cost in an educational and institutional web has not made it any cheaper.

Projects launched during the honeymoon generation were almost invariably long-term in nature. In the following decade, however, the commission failed to fulfill the bureaucratic laws of growth and development. When its mandate and budget doubled to encompass a records program (and the NHPC became the NHPRC), this was of less interest and concern to historians and editors—though it should not have been. Consequently, commission members and staff faced the prospect of nurturing projects created by others which claimed almost all of the editing budget and they seemingly chafed at their

role in tending a garden which only the oldest had helped to plant and only the youngest could expect to see fully harvested. Eager to launch new ventures, some grew impatient with existing projects.

Impatience led to suggestions that the documents be made available at once on microfilm, printed (if at all) selectively, and that annotation be reduced in volumes that survived the onslaught. If no single one of these propositions represented an outrageous demand, nonetheless together they constituted something new in the field: pressure from critics and funders alike—a fearsome alliance—for different treatment of the documents. However constructively intended, the result was to raise the spectre that extraneous considerations would exercise intellectual control over the nature and practice of editing. Commission projects, which ranged from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries and included a wide variety of documents, had flourished under expectations of diversity in which the single demand had been for excellence, not uniformity.

Finally, the commission itself sponsored a study by outside consultants that reflected the impatience of some commission members and staff, but carried this to exaggerated lengths by recommending measures to speed the work along—most of which had long since been implemented by the commission—and urged placing all projects on timetables for productivity, disregarding their diversity and individuality.⁶ If adopted, these recommendations would change the commission from a sponsor to an adversary of historical editing. By forcing multivolume projects into greater selectivity with arbitrary completion schedules, the report implied, the commission could eventually spend more money on short-term endeavors currently in demand. The authors of the report forgot that when the winds of fashion blow as briskly down the corridors of the NHPRC as they do in foundation offices, the commission will desert its original purpose; nothing so superbly right as the expensive scholarly monuments now under construction will ever be possible again. No doubt many bureaucrats grumbled while compilers of the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies* spent forty-three years producing thirty-one volumes. The bureaucrats are forgotten; the books are indispensable to research and a credit to the U.S. government. Federally funded documentary publications in the nineteenth century saved from oblivion words written on paper which has long since disappeared. Modern editors perform much the same function, adding to their mandate documents in private hands and obscure places whose preservation is even more at risk.

But if preservation alone were the goal, cheaper

means could be found. The dawning of the honeymoon period of modern historical editing coincided with remarkable technical advancement in photocopying and its rapid availability throughout the country. The concentration of reliable copies of documents from around the country—and often beyond its borders—in a central location increased enormously the capacity of editors to approach comprehensiveness in research. Microfilm—first dramatized as an instrument of historical revisionism by Whittaker Chambers—could serve either as a collection device for documents to be edited for publication or as the actual product. Many critics urged the use of microform as an alternative to traditional letterpress publication. The commission itself eventually pushed for a halfway covenant of comprehensive microform and selective letterpress editions. Discussions of microform first or book first recapitulated many arguments of the debate in less exalted circles over premarital sex.

To some extent, the debate over microform versus printed editions represented a struggle for prestige and control. Some historians who preferred to base their work upon unpublished sources argued for filming rather than printing the products of documentary projects. Proponents of microform sometimes wrote as if they wished to employ historical editors as erudite truffle hounds, sniffing out delicacies for others to consume. No proponent, however, offered to disseminate the results of his own research in microform. “Whenever [I] hear any one arguing for slavery,” said Abraham Lincoln, “I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally.”⁷ Publication of key documentary sources interrupted a cycle of monographic production in which theory and revision employed historians who in turn employed the same unpublished documents. Microfilm made these documents more accessible without robbing them of their scholarly virginity; publication in context, analyzed, annotated, and indexed, apparently diminished their value to scholarly Luddites.

The foregoing should indicate my dissatisfaction with some criticism of historical editing in the past decade. It should not, however, indicate a distaste for any criticism. Socrates taught us that the unexamined life was not worth living; we have learned since that the examined life is frequently quite unpleasant. Too many historical editors long pursued their craft in relative isolation from the work of others, especially those outside the field of American history. As a result, they tended to avoid introspection about what they were doing, why and how they planned to accomplish their work. In one sense, at least, criticism was long overdue. Unfortunately, most of it came from those who ignored or failed to under-

stand what the editing was designed to accomplish. One critical article directed special attention to the formation of the Association for Documentary Editing, a “dangerous” move which “further balkanizes the profession and institutionalizes jealousy.”⁸ The authors assumed that ADE represented nothing more than an effort to draw commission wagons into a circle rather than a decision to involve editors in several disciplines in an exploration of common problems. Membership in ADE required no pledge that editors withdraw from the American Historical Association or the Modern Language Association, and membership in the latter groups in turn did not preclude membership in such dangerous and balkanized organizations as the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Virtually all specialized fields today attempt to reach out to other disciplines for new ideas and techniques; editors need more rather than less of this.

The very fact that the Boyd *Jefferson* inaugurated a new era in American historical editing constituted a source of both strength and weakness. Boyd’s success led to emulation of his technique and tended to discourage exploration of alternatives. The line of historical editions stemming from the *Jefferson* tended to neglect the lessons learned by those editing in other fields. Historical editors needed to look beyond Edmund Wilson for an appraisal of the efforts of the Center for Editions of American Authors.⁹ Too many glanced with dismay at vetting and sealing; too few carefully examined the underlying principles.

Probably the ablest criticism of the past decade has come from G. Thomas Tanselle, who used the standards of American literary editors to judge the transcription policies of those in the historical field.¹⁰ His devastating arguments quickly claimed the attention of historical editors. Some reacted as if the Japanese had again struck Pearl Harbor; more sought to repair their damaged vessels by altering, improving, or explaining transcription policies with a clearer understanding that inconsistent or silent alterations designed for “the reader’s convenience” more often represented the critic’s opportunity. We may eventually come to regard Tanselle’s article as the single most important step forward in American historical editing since the publication of the first volume of the Boyd *Jefferson*.

In the future, we can hardly expect a return to the honeymoon period of uncritical reception of historical editing, and I doubt that this would be desirable if possible. Under the best circumstances, criticism will be better informed, more closely attuned to the matters at hand, and more constructive in purpose. For too long, reviewers of historical editions for professional journals treated them as above or beneath critical appraisal: above criticism because of their

noble purpose, magisterial scholarship, and obvious value to other researchers; beneath criticism because they were considered mere compilations, mechanically arranged, carrying no intellectual baggage other than that of the documents themselves. Surveying academic historians in the late 1960s, Walter Rundell encountered many who believed that documentary editing provided "a refuge for unambitious scholars."¹¹ The belated discovery that work of such scholarly drudges would stand on library shelves longer than most other books—if only because of commission standards on paper quality—forced American historians to take a closer look at the underlying rationale. Much of the criticism of the past decade may be an overreaction to the lavish praise of the honeymoon period but not all lacked insight. Although one article complained that in recent years the commission made only "the most glacial change in direction,"¹² it could be argued that the direction of change during the past decade has been influenced more by Lemisch than by Boyd. In retrospect, American historians may be grateful both for the change in direction and also for its glacial quality.

The current battle for congressional reauthorization and reappropriation of the NHPRC has forced many both inside and outside historical editing to rethink their positions on the commission and its projects. As Samuel Johnson pointed out, "when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." Editors, archivists, and other historians quickly formed a coalition to save the commission and found support almost everywhere they carried their cause. Ironically, most public and congressional support stemmed from commission sponsorship of the editions most heavily criticized during the past decade. Those who sniped at commission projects with the hope of redirecting funding now realized that if the NHPRC goes to the gallows, the Pentagon is the only heir. The enormously gratifying response to the call for preservation of the NHPRC will, I hope, lead to its continuation and also to a broader understanding of its programs and accomplishments which will benefit the entire field of historical editing, practitioners and consumers alike. The need to close ranks against barbarians should force editors to respond thoughtfully to their critics and force critics to recognize their heavy responsibilities.

Editors and their critics should, we hope, put the past thirty years in perspective. The fruits of the NHPRC consist of over three hundred volumes, some better edited than others, but all contributing toward a better understanding of the American past. Those who have edited some of them know that the contents have as yet been meagerly exploited by

other historians and that these veins will continue to yield ore when all the current debates over funding, scope, and technique have long since subsided.

1. Fredrika J. Teute, "Views in Review: A Historiographical Perspective on Historical Editing," *American Archivist* 43 (1980):43-56.
2. Jesse Lemisch, "The American Revolution Bicentennial and the Papers of Great White Men," *AHA Newsletter* 9 (1971): 7-21.
3. John C. Burnham in *American Historical Review* 84 (1979):548; *ibid.* 85 (1980):274.
4. Teute, p. 56.
5. James Ford Rhodes, *Historical Essays* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1909), p. 78.
6. Henry F. Graff and A. Simone Reagor, *Documentary Editing in Crisis: Some Reflections and Recommendations* (Washington: National Historical Publications and Records Commission, March 1981).
7. Roy P. Basler et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953-1955), 8:361.
8. Richard H. Kohn and George M. Curtis III, "The Government, the Historical Profession, and Historical Editing: A Review," *Reviews in American History* 9 (1981):151.
9. Edmund Wilson, "The Fruits of the MLA," *The Devils and Canon Barham* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), pp.154-202.
10. G. Thomas Tanselle, "The Editing of Historical Documents," *Studies in Bibliography* (1978):[1]-56.
11. Walter Rundell, Jr., *In Pursuit of American History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), p. 263.
12. Kohn and Curtis, p. 151.

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"One is reminded of the clerics who started this publishing tradition, especially of the Benedictines of the French Abbey of St. Maur, who 350 years ago, at the suggestion of Erasmus, began to collect, edit, and publish *all* the works of the Fathers of the Church, both Latin and Greek, in giant folios that came from the abbey for more than 100 years in ivory vellum covers, like a long procession of robed abbots." From D.J.R. Bruckner, "The Grand Projects," *The New York Times Book Review*, October 18, 1981, a discussion of university presses and their publication of big books and multi-volume editions.

We are intrigued by a description of "Empty Words" by John Cage, "a 10-hour monologue (plus breaks) that consists of displaced phrases, words, syllables, letters and sounds drawn by chance operations from the 'Journals' of Henry David Thoreau. . . . Someone says the whole last section is based on Thoreau's punctuation, rather than his text." Lon Tuck, *The Washington Post*, September 30, 1981.