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Oberg, Barbara, "Interpretation in Editing: The Gallatin Papers" (1982). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. Paper 171.

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Interpretation in Editing: The Gallatin Papers

BARBARA OBERG*

When I spoke with Nate Reingold about his expectations for this panel and what issues it might raise, he suggested first of all that he had no interest in dictating a format to the members of the panel, and second, that we might keep our remarks brief enough to allow time for discussion on the subject of interpretation. What Nate really meant by the word discussion, is, I believe *controversy*, because he then went on to express the desire that I—or other members of the panel as well—would say something provocative, something which would attack some sacred cows of the editorial profession. My own personal style is not particularly one of provoking controversial or argumentative encounters in meetings, though I can enjoy it when other people do. But I have the strong sense that anything which an editor says in public at an ADE meeting on the subject of interpretation is likely to produce a vigorous debate. The statement made by Robert Leitz this morning directing the annotation of Jack London's letters to "just the facts", and the responses I sensed around the room indicate that interpretation in editing is a subject on which we can have a good heated dialogue.

I think I will plunge right in, and propose that not only is interpretive editing all that we can do, not only is it proper, but that it is the best chance we have of producing works of history which will stand as classics of historical writing. I want to use as an example of a good, classic, interpretive, edition of correspondence and published writings, Henry Adams's three-volume edition of *Writings of Albert Gallatin*. This is the edition of Gallatin's writings which scholars now have, and which they had for about the last century. In 1877 Henry Adams was engaged by Gallatin's only surviving son to write a biography of Albert Gallatin. He concluded by publishing both a *Life* and a selected edition of writings. Adams, grandson of John Quincy Adams, and a son of Charles Francis Adams, was a medieval historian, editor of the *North American Review*, biographer, author of a multi-volume narrative history of the early Republic, philosopher of history, art historian, and novelist. Members of Henry Adams's family had, of course, been closely as-

sociated with Gallatin, and John Quincy and Gallatin served together on a diplomatic mission to negotiate the Treaty of Ghent. Adams had, therefore, superb qualifications for undertaking both a biography and an edition of Gallatin's writings. He was an intelligent and knowledgeable person, with an interest in the subject; and we cannot really, on top of all that, expect him to have had training as a documentary editor.

It is Henry Adams's conception of Albert Gallatin which has dominated our knowledge of him, for the little writing which has been done on him ever since relies heavily upon Adams's work. In a period of just under three years, Adams produced two volumes of selected correspondence, one volume of published pamphlets, and a single-volume biography, *The Life*. What a remarkable record for getting out the volumes; one can only be grateful that he is not here to be held up as a model to us by the NHPRC. Let me examine his work more closely to indicate why it is interpretive. Quite obviously it is the principle of selection that from the beginning of Adams's editorial enterprise, leads to a very clear interpretation of Gallatin, of his life and career, and of his place in the American political and economic system. Like most editions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, there is no annotation. It cannot, therefore, be long footnotes—explanatory, critical or interpretive—which shape the edition. Adams said nothing of editorial method, or what principles he would use to select only a very few of the thousands of documents available to him. Adams ignored almost entirely the early period of Gallatin's life—his life in Geneva, his stay in Massachusetts, and his entrance into state and national politics. Volume I covers the years 1788 through June 1816. But of all the letters included, only two pre-date 1801, the year in which Gallatin assumed the office of Secretary of the Treasury in Jefferson's first administration.

One practical reason for this might be that there are fewer letters extant for the early years of his life, but there are certainly enough available to have included some in the edition. Raymond Walters, who wrote the most recent biography of Gallatin, noted in his introduction that Adams had chosen to concentrate on the national period of Gallatin's life, and to see that as the real beginning of his important political career. But this is a somewhat uncritical judgment of Adams's motives, and rather lets Adams off the hook. In actuality Adams began his edition of Gallatin's politics, only when he began to approve of

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Gallatin's behavior. It is not simply that Adams concentrated on the national period of Gallatin's life, but that he did not understand or condone Gallatin's early enthusiasm for Rousseau, his decision to leave Geneva rather than reform the Geneva political system with which he was dissatisfied, or his preference for an unsettled life on the frontier. Of Gallatin's decision to emigrate to America, Adams simply noted in the *Life* that "the act was not a wise one," and then he eliminated that period of Gallatin's life from the edition of correspondence.

The pattern of leaving material out of the edited writings continues throughout the 1780s and 1790s in a way which can only be deliberate, not accidental. The comprehensive microfilm edition of *The Papers of Albert Gallatin* contains four reels of documents for this period. Most of them—the collection at the New York Historical Society—were among those which were given to Adams by the family, so he did have the opportunity to use them. If a scholar were to use Adams's documentary record of Gallatin's life, his emigration to the United States, his land speculations in western Pennsylvania, Virginia, Ohio, West Virginia and Indiana, his part in the Whiskey Rebellion, his brief tenure in the Senate, never occurred. Significantly, there is only one letter there, which is a letter to Governor Thomas Mifflin, September 1794, on the peaceful behavior and general sense of submission to the laws among the people of the western countries. I think Adams liked the sentiments expressed in the letter, and saw it as characteristic of the "true" Albert Gallatin.

I might point out one other interesting omission from the edition. Adams's edition bears no indication that Gallatin was ever associated with or even knew Aaron Burr. No letter from Aaron Burr is included in the edition, yet at least nineteen letters passed between the two men between 1799 and 1801. Nothing is said about the election of 1800. When Gallatin achieved respectability, when he assumed an important, responsible post in Jefferson's administration, and apparently when he abandoned immature political ideas and questionable friends, Adams was prepared to begin the documentary record of his life.

Lest it appear that I am attacking Adams, or soliciting support for a new edition of the papers of Albert Gallatin, I would quickly say that I am instead offering praise to him. What is amazing is that the Adams edition has lasted and that it has served us well, but that it is an outright interpretation of Gallatin and of his place in American history. The edition makes not a single comment on Gallatin; it only omits through a policy of selection, the "undesirable" period of his life. Just as Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* tells us as much or more about eighteenth-century England and about Edward Gibbon's intellectual and emotional biases than it does about the fall of Rome, so too does Adams's historical writing and the edition of Gallatin's correspondence in particular reveal Henry Adams as much as it does Albert Gallatin.

The work remains a monument, however, and one that we must come to terms with. As I contemplate and prepare for a new edition of Gallatin's writings, various issues come to mind. One entire area of discussion which is highly pertinent is that of how much decisions are interpretive from the start, and how seemingly methodological or pragmatic choices very quickly, and with great subtlety, can become substantive. They can determine the direction of the project. I suppose we could compare them to the "accidentals" of Greg's copy-text, recognizing that they are not an accident and that they will be very important to the shape of the edition. A few examples might be the choice of a title, the order of materials (chronological or by series, or in some cases a topical grouping of some materials within a volume); the distribution of volumes (will all parts of the subject's life receive equal treatment, or is there a reason to publish a larger percentage of materials for one given portion of the life?). These are only three obvious examples. In the Gallatin edition, for example, of the proposed six volumes only half will deal with what has traditionally been characterized as the important portion of his career. The final two volumes will publish a much larger percentage of the extant documents than the preceding volumes, not only because Adams printed a smaller percentage of them, but because they seem to be much more interesting to historians of our time than to those of previous generations.

This is an interpretive decision, and it raises the important question of the influence which outside forces and fashions can have upon the editing of volumes. Adams chose to edit Gallatin because of his profound sense of identification with him. Gallatin was the ideal American statesman, and Adams wrote that his work on Gallatin was a labor of love. Some contemporary editors have chosen to work on particular figures because of a strong sense of attachment to them; some editors, on the contrary, have clearly disliked the figure whose papers they were editing. I can think of two particular examples here. First, a review of an early volume of the Franklin Papers which wished the footnotes did not make it quite so clear the editor disliked Franklin. The second example comes from a review by Aileen Kraditor in 1973 of the *Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, in which she noted that clearly the editor of the first volume disliked Garrison, and the editor of the second volume had great admiration for him. So I think that an editor's attitude toward the subject can be very important in assessing what sort of edition will be produced. What is central is that we consider how our own personal, academic, psychological, and even ideological presuppositions can influence our editing.

I mentioned the impact which outside forces and fashions can have upon the edition, and this is an area which has been of great concern and fascination to me. In the most general sense, what we choose to edit is influenced

by very practical matters. What publishers choose to publish and agencies or foundations choose to fund, grows out of the intellectual currents around us. Why do we ask the particular questions of the past which we do at any given time? Why is social history more prominent than political history right now, and what accounts for the attention being directed from editions of individual political leaders to groups, to institutions, to leaders of economic and social causes? The very choice of whom to edit, or who is worthy of an editor, raises for the entire field of historical editing the question of interpretation. To decide to edit someone's papers is to make a subjective

statement. An edition could be a kind of "compensatory history" (the phrase is Gerda Lerner's) to make up for an area of history previously "underrepresented." An edition could be subjected to use for a particular partisan, ideological purpose. I am presently highly sensitive to this danger, because Gallatin's language and fiscal theories can have a highly contemporary and partisan ring to them. It may be that we risk outsiders putting their own interpretations on our work. We want, therefore, to be quite clear in our own minds what it is that we are doing and what interpretation governs the editorial enterprise we are undertaking.