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## *The Library of America*

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# The Library of America

JOANN BOYDSTON

The spring 1982 publication of the first four volumes of The Library of America (Hawthorne, Melville, Stowe, Whitman) inaugurated a series that is expected to produce and keep permanently in print more than one hundred volumes. Four more volumes (Mark Twain, Howells, and two of Jack London) will have appeared by the time this account is published. These volumes are the initial concrete expression of a movement dating from the late 1940s and early 1950s to collect, preserve, publish, and disseminate widely the best texts of classic American writings.

The large number of reviewers who commented enthusiastically and at some length on the simultaneous appearance of the first Library of America volumes agreed on a number of points; the two that dominated the reviews can be summarized briefly. First, the Library volumes are “a triumph of the bookmaker’s art”: for this, as Jerome Frank said in *Publishers’ Weekly* (7 May 1982, p. 57), credit goes to Bruce Campbell, who “has created a handsome, unpretentious and compact format whose specifications are impressive.” Second, the initiation of this mammoth undertaking marks an event of considerable magnitude in American cultural history. For getting the Library started, credit can be assigned to Daniel Aaron, Jason Epstein, and Cheryl Hurley, key officers of the Library, whose insight and skill shaped the series and brought it to fruition.

The long-term movement that led to the publication of these first volumes of the Library of America was, however, too complex for proper elaboration in the typical review and was therefore treated only briefly by the critics who identified it. This was a movement in two parts, each identifiable by its central emphasis: one segment was concerned primarily with preserving, publishing, and making readily available in a uniform series the best of American writings; the other part was chiefly interested in the kinds of texts to be used in such an edition, the editorial framework in which the writings would be presented, the editorial apparatus, and similar considerations. Reviewers who have discussed the Library have seen these two separate aspects of the Library’s history as somehow symbolized in the 1960s controversy between Edmund Wilson and the Modern Language Association’s Center for Editions of American Authors. This attribution of the movement’s “publication” aspect to Edmund Wilson and of its “editorial” aspect to the MLA/CEAA has resulted in the widespread notion that the Library of America grew solely from Wilson’s dream of “an American *Pléiade*,” that the contents of the Library

volumes would be almost entirely MLA/CEAA texts, and that both parts of the movement began only in the early 1960s.

But no person or group of persons can fairly receive exclusive credit for either part of the impetus that culminated in the Library, nor did the movement start in the 1960s. Several forces interested in the preservation and publication of American letters, often with similar goals but disparate emphases, contributed to the climate that finally made the Library of America possible. For example, as early as 1951, and again in 1954, the National Historical Publications Commission proposed to the President a national program to preserve and publish the papers of America’s leaders—statesmen, *littérateurs*, and philosophers. Completely apart from its support for the Center for Editions of American Authors, the central role of the National Endowment for the Humanities in this part of the movement has been to some extent overlooked. In 1966, Henry Allen Moe said in his inaugural address as Chairman of the Endowment that one of the two channels of public access to the values of the humanities was “through the preparation of comprehensive editions, accurately edited, of works by great American writers of every period of our history, whether these be state papers, works in history, imaginative literature, or philosophy.” The Endowment’s role in the Library continues, of course, in a substantial grant that has made possible its auspicious beginning.

Throughout the 1960s, a primary factor in the movement was also the influence of Edmund Wilson and the host of persons who shared his vision of making our literary heritage available to a wide readership. In fact, Wilson prophetically described almost the exact format of the Library volumes in his 18 August 1962 letter (quoted by Wilson in *New York Review of Books*, 26 September 1968) to Jason Epstein, now Treasurer of the Library. Wilson there proposed an American edition that would “follow the example of the *Éditions de la Pléiade*, which have included so many of the French classics, ancient and modern, in beautifully produced and admirably printed thin paper volumes ranging from 800 to 1,500 pages.” We can note in passing that the Library of America volumes are, as John Gerber remarked in 1969 about American editions in general, “much more readable than the *Pléiade* type of book, which benefits the ophthalmologists more than any one else.” Wilson’s ideas, of course, encompassed much more than a particular format; his goal of preserving the American literary heritage was widely approved, and, in time, his leadership mantle

passed to Jason Epstein, who played a central role in obtaining the Library's initial Ford Foundation funding.

The other part of the movement, characterized by editorial concerns, has an even longer and more complex history dating in some of its features from the early 1940s and Julian P. Boyd's first "Proposed Method of Preparation" in his planning statement for the comprehensive edition of *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*. Boyd's subsequent description of his editorial method in the first volume of the Jefferson edition (1950) was the earliest formal statement of its kind and one that has had considerable influence in the field of documentary editing.

As early as 1947-48, the Modern Language Association had formed a "Committee on Definitive Editions," dedicated not only to collecting and making available American literary works but also to establishing principles for editing those works. The Committee was the forerunner of the MLA Center for Editions of American Authors, formed in 1963, which was in turn succeeded by the Committee on Scholarly Editions. As its name implies, the CSE broadened the purview and goals of the CEAA to include all scholarly editions and to set up guidelines and principles that apply to a wide variety of texts. The overall growth of modern editorial theory during the last forty years, as a discipline with a body of scholarly research and products, has been thoroughly discussed by G. Thomas Tanselle in several articles—notably "Greg's Theory of Copy-Text and the Editing of American Literature," *Studies in Bibliography* 28 (1975): 167-229, and "The Editing of Historical Documents," *ibid.* 31 (1978): 1-56; the literature is described in similar detail in "The Center on Scholarly Editions: An Introductory Statement," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 92 (1977): 568-97. These studies make clear that assigning credit to any one person or group for the "editorial" part of the movement now expressed in the Library of America is as difficult as isolating a single impetus for the collecting-publishing part. Within the past five years, communication among editors of various orientations from different fields has been accelerated by the efforts of the CSE and the National Endowment for the Humanities, and parti-

cularly by the growth of the supra-disciplinary organizations, the Society for Textual Studies and the Association for Documentary Editing. The communication and common understandings fostered by these groups are in large measure responsible for the eclectic scholarly editorial policies used by the Library of America.

To put those editorial policies in perspective, it is important to clarify what the Library of America is not. First, it is not a "literary" edition, even though it was first organized by The Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., which was incorporated with initial support from the Ford Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The word "literary" in the original corporation's title refers to the full range of American letters rather than to an artificial distinction between works produced by "literary" or "historical" editors. Second, the Library is not an editing project; it is a publishing project. As a publishing project, it is beyond doubt an undertaking of monumental and historic proportions, a project whose innovative practices and experiences in all phases of production will increasingly be discussed at length by students of publishing. Even though it is not an "editorial" project, however, the Library's editorial aspect is of special interest to editors because it represents in many ways some forty years' cumulative study of and experience in editing in this country.

"Editing" is a word so variously used, even by editors, that all parts of the Library of America's editorial approach are included here: selection of authors and works; editorial framework and arrangement of editorial matter; choices of texts; changes in texts, and proofreading.

Comprehensive analysis of the Library's selection philosophy and procedures appears in R. W. B. Lewis's "The Literary Americans," *New Republic*, 19 May 1982, pp. 26-31 (see esp. pp. 28-30). Some details not discussed by Lewis are these: a large, active, and broadly qualified Selection Committee, chaired by Richard Poirier, vice-president of the Library of America, is dedicated to presenting works that represent the full spectrum of American thought. Working within a carefully wrought structure, this committee meets with Library of America officers and staff members. After the committee has tentatively decided to include an author, it entertains proposals about which of that author's works should be in the Library and in what order those works should appear in Library volumes. A period of consultation usually ensues, with the final decision reached only after a number of qualified persons have advised the committee about the author's basic, classic writings. Although references to volume "editors" have appeared in various places, no person is officially designated as the editor of any volume. In the front-matter of each book appears a standard single-page notice, "[John Doe] wrote the notes and chronology and selected the texts [read 'works'] for this volume."

The editorial matter for the Library was designed to be spare, consisting only of “a table of contents, headnotes (where appropriate for individual letters or journal entries), notes, a chronology of the author’s life, and a textual note. The notes, chronology, and textual note will appear at the end of the volume.” Each of these sections was further described in the same 1980 internal Library statement just quoted:

NOTES are to be few and of substantive nature, referring either to words, phrases, or concepts in the work that genuinely require clarification or to textual problems or cruxes significant enough to merit the attention of the general reader. The annotation should be kept to a minimum.

CHRONOLOGY. A concise chronology (between 3 and 7 pages) should record the central facts of the author’s life and career. The author’s major works should be cited to provide the reader with a basic bibliography.

Historical events of the times should not be cited except when they directly affected the author’s life or work, e.g., Stephen Crane and the Spanish-American War. If an historical event merits inclusion, it should be cited in the context of the author’s life and work.

While the chronology should not be extensive, it should give the reader some sense of the major forces in the author’s life and work. Since there will be no critical essay, the chronology should record more than mere demographic information and should be complete and interesting in and of itself.

TEXTUAL NOTE. A brief essay (between 3 and 7 pages) will appear following the chronology, setting forth the rationale for deciding which *texts* of the selected works are the most appropriate for the volume. . . . This statement should contain a brief textual history of the works. It is to be limited to textual or editorial matters and is not to include biographical discussion or critical interpretation. The textual note should include a record of any typographical errors that have been corrected in the texts.

Early announcements and notices, necessarily compressed by considerations of space and of wide audience appeal, describe Library texts as “uncorrupted” and “the most authoritative.” Key phrases in current statements about the Library refer to efforts to select “an authoritative edition of each work,” and in each case the “text that [in scholarly advisers’ opinions] comes closest to the author’s intention.” A number of reviewers have implied that MLA-CEAA/CSE texts would be used when officially

“approved” texts were not available. This element of the Library of America editorial approach is particularly important to editors of varied backgrounds, inasmuch as the Library uses only texts that have been previously edited in some way. All materials included have been published before, which clearly means that a person or combination of persons—whether publisher, document-transcriber, compiler, proofreader, textual critic, or compositor—has applied editorial judgment to the texts before their selection for use in the Library.

The philosophical orientation of the Library of America was explicit from the start; a 1979 proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities mentions not only CEAA/CSE texts, but quotes from the CSE “Introductory Statement” to emphasize that “one of the [Library’s] aims is to foster the widespread dissemination of reliable texts in cheap editions appropriate for classroom use and available to the general reading public. . . . *The texts would be the most reliable that scholarship can provide*” (italics added).

Selecting the most reliable texts that scholarship can provide is a more complicated undertaking than previous references suggest and one that is, obviously, far from automatic. Just as the Selection Committee not only chooses authors to be represented in the series but also consults extensively with scholars about which of that author’s works in fact form the “core of American literature,” so also the three-person Textual Standards Committee meets with the Library of America staff to study and discuss at length the textual research done on each author’s work and to decide on the basis of all the evidence which texts will be used.

Specifically, the policies that govern the choice of texts for Library of America volumes continue to be those that G. Thomas Tanselle proposed to Library President Daniel Aaron in a letter of 7 May 1979. The key statement in that document is that the Library should select for each part of every volume “the text that is most defensible from a scholarly point of view as a text deserving of republication and wide dissemination.” As Tanselle explained further, the policy has certain ramifications: “Thus if a reliable scholarly edition has already been published—whether it is a CEAA/CSE edition or an edition prepared independently of those MLA committees—the text of that edition would normally be the one selected.” Attention is called to the word “normally,” which is applied even to the previously published editions “prepared independently of those MLA committees.” The implication is clear: CEAA/CSE editions are not automatically chosen; in fact, even scholarly editions prepared independently of those committees are not automatically chosen. Moreover, if a critical edition does not exist or is not available for use in the Library, the choice of texts poses a new problem, one not necessarily easier to solve but simply different. In such cases, the texts will often be “the first edition of a

work or of some other edition that constitutes a significant document in literary history.”

The cornerstone of the Library of America textual policy is that all choices of texts must be “defensible from a scholarly point of view.” The Textual Standards Committee bases its decisions on extremely thorough and sophisticated bibliographical research by the Library of America staff similar to the evidence collected by any editor as the first step in preparing a scholarly edition. As Don L. Cook wrote in a 1980 letter to Cheryl Hurley,

The choice of text should be based on a full knowledge of all the forms, and the choice among those forms should be based on the explicit acknowledgement of differences and of the basis for the preference. The basis of choice may differ from author to author, even essay to essay, but whether the basis is historical primacy, matured authorial judgment, artistic polish, or documentary significance, that basis should be clear to the compiler, to the textual standards committee, and to the user of the volume.

Ordinarily, when that kind of evidence has been assembled and studied, the choice of “the most defensible” text is not difficult. Without discussing specific selections—which are always identified in the published volumes—it can be noted that CEAA/CSE critical editions are not always used, even when available; first editions are not always used, even in the absence of critical editions; occasionally, volumes include a mixture of variously edited texts, each selected for a specific reason, and always identified in the published volumes.

Once texts have been chosen, however, further “editorial” work diverges from that used in developing critical editions, as Tanselle proposed in 1979:

Whether a reliable scholarly edition or a first (or other significant early) edition is chosen, any unquestionable errors that the editor discovers in the text can be corrected, so long as all such alterations are recorded in a list with the text. No readings other than those that are demonstrable errors should be altered, so that readers can be assured that they are receiving accurate reproductions of particular previous texts, chosen according to a well-considered rationale and altered only with respect to typographical (or other undeniable) errors, all of which are recorded in a list in the volume.

This policy is expressed in short paragraphs that appear in the “Note on the Text(s)” in each Library of America volume, following a statement about which texts are used. First:

The standards for American English continue to fluctuate and in some ways were conspicuously different in earlier periods from what they are now. In nineteenth-century writings, for example, a word might be spelled in more than one way, even in the same work, and such variations might be carried into print. Commas were sometimes used expressively to suggest the movements of voice, and capitals were sometimes meant to give significance to a word beyond those it might have in its uncapitalized form. Since modernization would remove such effects, this volume has preserved the spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and wording of the editions reprinted here.

That paragraph is followed by another standard statement with minor appropriate variations:

The present edition is concerned only with representing the texts of these [identified] editions; it does not attempt to reproduce the features of their typographic design—such as the display capitalization of chapter openings.

Changes made in the specified texts for the Library of America volume are noted at this point, followed by the brief running list of typographic errors that have been corrected. Despite the careful proofreading of earlier editions, even of widely accepted critical texts, the in-house control of printer’s copy preparation has made possible the discovery and correction of errors in all Library texts published.

As both the CEAA and the CSE have long maintained, procedures for thorough and careful supervision of proofreading are integral to any complete set of “editorial” standards. In this respect the Library of America has a distinct advantage over most other publishing, and in some cases editorial, projects. Locating and correcting previous errors, whether in critical texts, first editions, or “other significant early forms” of texts has been facilitated by the Library’s proofreading procedures. Hanna M. Bercovitch, Senior Editor, supervises a cadre of freelance proofreaders in the New York City area who have qualified for their positions by passing a rigorous test. An in-house statement to the Textual Standards Committee in the summer of 1982 summarized the steps in the proofreading procedures of the Library:

The proofreading procedure for our books involves three complete readings by freelance proofreaders, plus readings of the corrections until perfect. Two readings take place simultaneously at Pass I (galley stage); corrections are collated on to the master proof by our most trusted proofreader and reviewed by Bercovitch before being returned to the compositor.

This stage takes about a month, depending on the length of the book. Freelancers then do a third reading at Pass II using the corrected master proof against the copy-edited manuscript. This also takes about a month. From that point, corrections and blues are checked and rechecked during about a month's time. In sum, the complete proofreading process from receipt of Pass I through approval of the blues takes about three months. When all blues are approved, film is made by the compositor and sent directly to the printer.

Moreover, because Library volumes are now and will continue to be reprinted frequently, new printings provide opportunities for speedy correction of the always

possible but never acceptable *new* error. If such errors are found, their correction is noted in reprintings, each of which is carefully identified by printing number and date.

All aspects of the editorial and textual policies of the Library of America thus represent a distillation of what scholarly editors have been learning and developing in this country since the end of World War II. Since the Library also is a coalescence of the sometimes divided movement to collect, preserve, and disseminate the best of American letters, it is finding wide acceptance in the scholarly community. All of us who classify ourselves as editors should find it especially rewarding that an effort of this kind, representing the highest scholarly standards, is at the same time clearly achieving its chief goal of appealing to the widest possible reading public.