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# *Some Reflections on the Soft Money Generation*

CHARLES T. CULLEN

When I reflect on the state of our association after five years of existence I am pleased at what I see. We have been forced by circumstances to mature early—ours was a baptism by fire—and I think we have succeeded. The hopes expressed at our organizational meeting in St. Louis in 1978 and the goals set by the first councils have been realized in a short period of time. Our membership has grown steadily and increasing numbers of people have attended our annual meetings to exchange information and ideas and to participate in the program. The editing guide called for by the association has been written and steps are now being taken to get it published. This is a major accomplishment for Mary-Jo Kline and for the association at large. Our committee structure is quite large and strong, involving more and more people in the affairs of the association. And perhaps most impressively, through the leadership of a small dedicated group dear to us all, our association has helped stem the most recent tide of Reagan administration anti-intellectualism that threatened the extinction of the NHPRC and the health of most historical projects.

While things have improved for us as editors, the past several years have brought change, perhaps revolutionary change, to our profession. It has been some time now since the high-speed train that brought most of us historians into this work jumped its track. Even though the train is moving once again, albeit with an uncertain rate of speed, the nature of being an editor is not the same now, nor is it likely ever again to be the same. A new generation of editors has emerged in the midst of our troubled recent past, a development that has important implications for us all. When viewed in perspective the emergence of this new generation is a natural development, although many of us have not accepted it, if indeed we have even recognized it. How did this development occur?

By the time President Carter's budget office began to apply the brakes to what I have described as a relatively fast-moving train, documentary editing had already experienced radical change since Julian Boyd launched

modern historical editing in 1950. In the decade of the 1950s, more than twenty-five projects had begun work with no federal funds but with a significant level of private support, particularly from the Ford and Rockefeller foundations, and from Time, Inc. Most editors in this first group of modern editors were part-time. They were typically professors who had special interests and/or ability in the subject of the project and who were given released time by their deans to direct its work. It was also at this time that the rather accidental but easily understood practice of establishing a project at an institution with a special interest in the subject began to emerge as an important characteristic of modern historical editions. The trend had its origins in the Adams project and then in Columbia University's final arrangements to edit the Hamilton Papers. The Universities of Kentucky and South Carolina also established projects to edit papers of two of their favorite sons. Today the uninitiated expect a project to be located at some "logical host institution," and when the location is not so neatly arranged there can be interesting consequences for a project.

Locating editorial projects at logical institutions was the key to the NHPRC's attempt to find financial support for most of those it wanted to see started. Seed money has always been more available from so-called logical institutions than from those with no clear identification with the subject of the edition. The Jefferson and Franklin papers find it impossible to convince their university administrators to match NHPRC grants or those from any other source, as do such newer and important projects as Robert Morris and Stanton-Anthony. The same is true for most of the "subject projects" (Ratification of the Constitution and First Federal Congress projects, to mention two) and for almost all the literary editions, which seem to be located at institutions by the rule that put the Jefferson and Franklin projects where they are—the project director wanted to do those papers, and began them on released time.

For a while just before the transformation from one generation to the next began, the NHPRC had lots of money to give away to historical projects. Grants were rising faster than inflation as the Commission tried to help editors employ the full-time staff they had been pleading for in order to make progress. Starting in 1974, the Commission was able to begin paying most of the costs of the priority projects which up till then

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CHARLES T. CULLEN delivered this presidential address at the Association for Documentary Editing's annual meeting in Baltimore, Maryland, on October 7, 1983. Dr. Cullen is editor of *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* at Princeton University Library, Princeton, New Jersey.

had been supported entirely by private funds. A program to train historians in the skills of editing was begun. Publishing subventions to presses—the thing that probably brought about the large increase in the congressional appropriation—were started at a time when publishers were beginning to question the wisdom of taking on these long-term projects. But the most important development was the creation of jobs that the first generation of editors filled quickly, bringing into the profession a bird of a different feather, those who would later become the second generation.

The differences between the experiences of these generations are the key to our present character as a profession. The second generation came into this work more accidentally than did the first. Most of the new editors were not already situated in tenured teaching positions when they joined an editorial staff. In fact, most did not have teaching positions at all. Many became editors “temporarily”—in a holding action until the teaching market improved. This group, like the first, earned graduate degrees to be *historians* or *literary scholars*, and the goal was a career teaching and writing articles and books, characteristics of the first generation before they took on the auxiliary duty of editing. The newer generation also had expected to continue the daily academic schedule it had enjoyed since childhood, teaching when classes were scheduled, and then working as the muse directed. The first shock to this generation was perhaps the editorial office schedule. Not only did it require adjustment to a daily office routine (nine to five, like business people) but also summers brought no change of pace. To make matters a bit worse, many of the new editors worked for the earlier type, while their bosses (another non-academic term) continued to teach and to follow more of an academic schedule than could they.

As time passed, many in this new generation became directors of their projects as the first generation either retired or gave up the frustrating attempt to be traditional academic scholars and editors and returned to full-time teaching, turning over the reins to the new breed. This was pleasing to the new generation. In some cases, they considered themselves the real professional editors anyway. Their primary, indeed in most cases only, loyalty was to their projects, not divided between two or three jobs. But the job now had a difficult, less secure, foundation from that enjoyed by the preceding generation. The most important change was from part-time partly funded editors, to full-time, fully funded editors. It became increasingly more common that no part of the project’s budget was anchored in hard money and full-time project directors had to fund their entire salaries as well as those for the rest of their staffs.

The time has now arrived when we must look

squarely at the implications of the changes occurring in our profession. Change, especially fundamental change, produces stress, and it is the perception of one’s situation that determines what effect stress will have. What is the proper perception of our present situation? The emerging generation, the inheriting generation if you will, is different primarily because we are full-time editors, and we must come to terms with situations which, if they are not new, are at least perceived differently by those of us who have been full-time editors for most of our careers. We must evaluate our present condition, and those who remain from the first generation—historians as well as other editors—must study the lessons of these developments in order to help shape our future because its course is far from certain.

The long-range funding of a full-time staff is our most serious problem and the implications of this problem have much to do with our perception of our jobs. We are the soft money generation, faced with an enormous challenge—finding sufficient funds to do our jobs. If we take an objective look at the funding of documentary editing in the United States, money has always been hard to come by. The relatively large influx of federal funds, which helped bring in more local funds, has been unusual in our experience taken as a whole. While we believe it should continue, do we have any reasonable expectation that it will? If it may not, what does this mean to us who have become full-time editors dependent on such financial support? I have yet to meet a soft money editor who did not agree that our financial plight is a Catch-22 situation: we must have funds to hire a staff to edit our materials, yet the time it takes to raise funds takes away from the time we need to direct the work and to do some of it ourselves. The search for funds is hard, time-consuming work and I have never heard an editor say he enjoys the task as much as editing. What is the solution to this financial problem? It is time that we heard the message: there is no solution. We cannot expect money ever again to come as easily as it did in the early 1970s. Editors cannot write a concise proposal clearly justifying the need for 10 percent more money expecting it to be given by the NHPRC. Money from the NEH has never come that easily and it is safe to say it never will.

Another important difference is time. As more junior editors moved up, some did so thinking it might be possible to become more purely historians or literary scholars now, in the mold of their predecessors, i.e., we might teach part-time. However, the experience of the past several years has taught us that it is a rare editor who has time to teach, direct a project, edit, and raise funds, and to do all of it ably. Many project sponsors have recognized this in the past several years and when looking for a new editor have preferred one who could

devote full time to the task. The experience of most of the “soft money editors” contains at least one solution to the problem of time: the teaching must go. Accepting this condition is almost as difficult as accepting the premise that one must become more or less a permanent fundraiser. How many of us earned graduate degrees in our subjects to edit documents? I am constantly asked, have always been constantly asked, if I do any teaching. I am asked this by fellow editors as much as by teaching historians. At least two things are implicit in the question: 1) Since I only edit documents, perhaps I have time to do some teaching; and, 2) I must at least want to teach if I am a real historian. Certainly nothing is wrong with the attitude that professional historians can and might want to teach their subjects. What is wrong or at least troublesome is the attitude that unless we teach we are somehow less than whole. We hold that attitude as much as our colleagues who teach. And this attitude causes us many problems in our professional happiness. Given the trauma associated with the requirements of fundraising and our altered perception of our professional roles, perhaps the NHPRC should be asked to fill its next vacant staff position with a psychiatrist.

Those of us who are full-time editors on soft money are different from our predecessors and we must come to terms with that fact. We have all finally realized that modern editing takes much time. Our projects will last longer than originally thought. I am somewhat concerned that one reaction to this realization is that something must be wrong with modern editing if it takes so

much time. Many projects started in the 1960s and early 1970s planning a small series and an early completion date. While some of these projects actually finished the job, most are taking longer than originally predicted, and I know of at least one that started in 1974 as a three-volume, five-year project that today, in 1983, has not yet published the first volume. My position is not that this is inexcusable, but that it should be recognized that the requirements of editing documents properly may make a fixed completion date impossible to establish early on, and that we, as the new generation of editors, must be aware of the implications of that fact from the beginning. We are frequently asked by our supporters how long our projects will last. We know that most fully funded, sizeable staffs can produce about two or at most three volumes a year barring any problems (which is itself impossible to do). The question becomes who will guarantee funding for the project for the next X number of years. And the pressure to produce seems greater now than it was in the early years of modern editing.

The first generation published many volumes of materials but the pace seemed to slow in the last decade. While the number of published volumes increased the number of projects in existence doubled as well. It is almost embarrassing to speculate that in real terms the pace slackened at about the same time money began to become more plentiful. The first generation editor hired new scholars—mostly new Ph.D.s without traditional jobs—as assistants to work full time. They had to learn the craft first, which took time, but they also



*Charles T. Cullen addresses the ADE members during the association's annual banquet.*

had to be paid and funds were beginning to tighten. The director had to spend more time finding money and less time editing and directing the editing, and what about the teaching duties? All of this took its toll on progress. And without progress, it is difficult to find continuing financial support. The harder it is to find funds, the more time it takes to look for them. Catch-22. No wonder some of the first generation have wanted to return to full-time teaching or to retire. What they expected the job to entail has changed dramatically. It is essential that the second generation take up the reins with both eyes open and that we do not have expectations that are unrealistic.

The more money our sponsors give us, the more they expect to see produced. This is a normal and probably correct assumption, but it is one that should present us with a clear choice rather than uncomfortable pressure. Our sponsors, including the NHPRC, the NEH, and foundations alike, have all put pressure on us to get the job done sooner, and this pressure will continue. Many of us have turned to technological innovations in hopes of achieving efficiency and progress. It is perhaps ironic that a group of scholars not noted for progressivism have been the real pioneers in this area. Whether this technology offers a significant solution to our problem remains to be seen, but it is at least another change that is likely to become fixed.

Pressure to adopt new limited editorial policies is likely to continue. These decisions are the responsibility of the editors and not the funding agencies, however. If the NHPRC has done much of this meddling it has not been sufficient to be talked about. The NEH, however, through its panels, has applied pressure on at least several occasions, "encouraging" editors to make alterations in their policies in order to obtain funding. And now foundations are applying similar pressure. I should like to quote from a letter written to a colleague by a prominent foundation officer this past summer: "The real satisfaction to be had from present achievement . . . is inevitably clouded somewhat by thoughts of how much remains to be done, and at what cost. . . . You remember that one of the points raised during the discussions that preceded . . . our [grant] had to do with the prospects for greater selectivity in choosing materials to include in [your] letterpress edition. [This] matter will not go away, and it would certainly come front and center and be a critical consideration if there were any thought of applying again to the Foundation for support at the expiration of the current grant."

Were serious errors made when our projects were originally designed? It is good for us to ask this question, even to be prompted to ask it by our financial supporters, and to recognize that the answer may be no, but it may be yes. I do not think the answer is

simple to arrive at, but we must all ask it. The comprehensive and inclusive nature of many projects' design might have come about primarily because it seemed money was plentiful and this policy was affordable. But we must ask the question honestly and come to the answer not unduly influenced by the pressures of those who hold the purse strings. I am willing to admit that the veritable baby boom of projects in the 1960s and early 1970s was just as unnatural as the ready availability of money that sustained them for a few years. And I suggest that the design of many of these projects was completed with the mistaken idea that what Julian Boyd was doing with the Jefferson Papers should be done with everyone's. I submit that our funding agencies are applying pressure on us to re-examine our project designs because few of us have done it on our own. Both sides are behaving improperly.

The initiative for re-evaluation must come from within the project itself. Once this step is taken and answers to the many questions are determined, we can then take another look at the seemingly endless nature of this period of editorial production. We can then more ably inform our sponsors how long the job will take and we can be more certain that our editorial policies are not going to shortchange those who use our edited materials. This is what new projects are doing. Those who have initiated projects in the past three or four years have few illusions about what they are doing or how long they might be doing it. They have made very careful decisions about editorial policy and they have accepted the responsibility of fundraising. Perhaps a third generation is emerging, from whom those of us in the transition generation might learn how to cope with our problems of identity and survival.

We can hope that this is true because I know of no one with a neat group of solutions for us. We must search for them together, and if we are to find valid, usable solutions to these problems, they will come from open discussion involving all of us. This association provides the forum and the talent for intelligent consideration of the future of documentary editing. We must recognize that just a few years ago there was no editorial profession. Thanks largely to the efforts and funds of the NHPRC and the NEH, there is one now. The Association for Documentary Editing exists so that scholars who choose to edit materials for publication can seek common goals through discussion and cooperation. Much hard work remains in order to answer the hard questions. It is a challenge that faces us now and one that we—first and second generations, project directors and project assistants, fundraisers and scholars—must accept if the tremendous achievements of modern documentary editing are to continue.