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Reflections of a Counter-Intuitive Editor

Dennis M. Conrad

My reflections are by someone who has followed a non-traditional or rather, counter-intuitive, path to and through documentary editing. The two projects that I have worked for, the Papers of General Nathanael Greene project and the Naval Documents of the American Revolution series, were and are situated in non-academic settings, and by that I mean not associated with a college or university. The Greene Papers was sponsored by the Rhode Island Historical Society and the Naval Docs project by the Naval Historical Center. Moreover, my path into editing was certainly atypical.

Let me first address my path into editing. It can only be characterized as serendipity—at least for me if not the editing profession—because it was certainly not the product of intelligent design.

I graduated with a Ph.D. in history and had done my dissertation on Nathanael Greene's Southern Campaigns. Greene was a Revolutionary War general who was, and still is, not very well known. I came out in what was euphemistically called a tight academic market. As I recall, there were only three job openings that year in my specialty and two of those were one or two year appointments. I remember one of my professors telling me that the department was not going to expend much effort on my behalf because I had a job teaching history at a local private school and in the department's view, I was employed and teaching talented students, which was more than they could say for many of their other PhD's. I did not aspire to be a high-school teacher and therefore began to look around for other opportunities. I heard of a bank that was hiring humanities PhD's and retraining them to be bankers. Deciding that I would not mind occasionally having a few dollars in the bank at the end of the month, I took the job and spent eighteen months as a banker before becoming a documentary editor.

That eighteen months as a banker has been a curse as well as a blessing. Upon joining the Greene Papers, Dick Showman, the project director, immediately decided that this training uniquely qualified me for the task of preparing the financial section of grant applications as well as doing the project's financial reports. This long digression finally has a point—sort of. One of the joys of being in a non-academic setting is that you end up working out the financial end of things without much help from the business office. So my first piece of advice to all of you is that—unless you enjoy doing financial

reports—never, never do anything that could be construed as real-world financial training. Project directors hate doing those reports and are always looking for an opportunity to dump them on to someone else. Seriously, I think the lesson is that you must be flexible on small, non-academic projects—ready to pitch in whenever and wherever you can and must.

To return to my narrative, while working at the bank I received, literally out of the blue, a letter asking me if I would be interested in joining the staff of the Greene Papers. My only experience with the Greene Papers to that point had been when I was starting my research on my Ph.D. dissertation, I had written asking if I could come to Providence to make use of the documents that they had collected on Greene's Southern campaign so I would not have to travel to various repositories around the country. I remember receiving a polite note informing me that their quarters were too cramped to allow me to go there to work. I showed the note to my dissertation advisor and he assured me that Richard Showman was just trying to prevent others from seeing the documents so that he could "scoop" everyone else in the field and publish a biography of Greene. Those of you who know Dick Showman know that there was never a kinder, more generous soul, and that that characterization was totally wrongheaded, but that was my only experience with the Greene Papers before I arrived.

I took the job, despite one member of the staff repeatedly telling me during the day I visited and interviewed that the money situation was precarious, that the long-term prospects were bleak, and that no one in their right mind made editing a career—I guess he was right, especially about the latter, but I have found that I have enjoyed a career in editing anyway. As you can see from this narrative, I had no training in editing, knew nothing about the discipline, and was forced to learn as I went. For some reason, Dick Showman was averse to sending me to Camp Edit so I was forced to learn the craft by talking to my colleagues at the Greene Papers and my fellow editors at the ADE annual meetings, as well as consulting books such as the Mary Jo Kline's *Guide to Documentary Editing*, Beth Luey's annotated bibliography, and Michael Stevens' casebook. I would not recommend this as the easiest way to go about things, but people in editing are generous and willing to share and do not consider questions, even the most basic, to be beneath them. So a piece of advice to young editors: make use of that wonderful resource that you have in this room and in this organization and do not hesitate to consult your fellow editors, to ask them even the most basic questions—particularly during the reception, pre-banquet cocktail party, or

President's post-banquet party when a little lubrication has loosened the jaw hinges. Seriously, your fellow editors are good and sharing people who know their craft and are willing to share.

After twenty-three years, I believe I have finally mastered the fundamentals of our profession—the science of editing. But, I have also come to believe that editing is an art and that great editors are born as well as made and that not just anyone can be a documentary editor—that you as editors are special, unique and uniquely valuable. I have worked with historians who were noted content specialists but who were not good documentary editors. There is among good editors a curiosity that causes them to dig deeper than many “typical” historians. The good documentary editor wants to know the name of a minor actor or the denouement of an event and this propels them to track down what others would consider superfluous and arcane information. At the same time, good editors have a cost-benefit ratio imprinted in them so that they do not become obsessive/compulsive about such things, realizing that sometimes the identity of that express rider who tarried on the road and did not deliver the letter in a timely manner to the disgust of the correspondent will have to remain nameless. I do not know how we convey this fact to the non-editing community, but I believe the best among us are very special and should be recognized as such.

I think some academics look down on documentary editors because they do not see our craft as interpretive. Among historians, we are lumped with chroniclers or genealogists and are seen as amassers of facts for their own sake rather than “creative” historians coming up with a new historical paradigm that explains, for example, the New Deal Era. I would take issue with this view on two fronts. First, documentary historians do interpretive history. Read the introductory essays in a documentary edition or the section notes or the headnotes. Some of the best summaries for historical periods and/or people's lives are to be found in those essays. Moreover, documentary editors interpret the documents and put them into context every day. It is necessary to do so in order to decide whether a document should be included or merely listed in a selective text; abstracted or printed in full; in the annotation and sometimes even in the annotation. Secondly: 98% of historians do not come up with the grand paradigm either. While that may be their goal, most monographs are no more over-arching than a typical documentary edition—in fact, I would argue that many are even less so.

Another aspect that hurts the standing of documentary editors is the collaborative nature of our work. While there are a number of one-person proj-

ects, the larger and better known projects typically boast several editors. A few years back, Barbara Oberg gave a wonderful Presidential address in which she discussed the fact that documentary editing is collaborative enterprise. In it, she suggested that it might be a model that other disciplines in the humanities should follow. While it is wonderful to work with others and to harness amazing intellects to one goal and end, it does not lend itself to proper recognition from others in academe. They value the lonely genius who does his or her work alone. The model is a Frederick Jackson Turner who bursts on the scene suddenly and unexpectedly with a brilliant new synthesis. I think the model is archaic, as evidenced by how things are now done, particularly in the sciences, but it is something about which we will need to educate others in the humanities.

While I am on the soapbox and dispensing advice, I would suggest that all editors, if they can, develop technical expertise. A number of documentary editions are “cutting edge” in digitization and web-basing. As an editor, if you can acquire a basic understanding in those areas, it will stand you in good stead in your own project and you can use such skills to assist others and thereby amass goodwill “chits” that can be cashed in when necessary. This is especially true for projects in non-academic settings where there is no technical support department to assist development offices or the curators or the library staff. Being innovative may also provide documentary editing with a cachet that will stand it apart and maybe even get your project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Next, I would echo Beverly Palmer in contending that you would be surprised to find who uses and is influenced and sometimes moved by your editions. Having been with projects in non-academic settings, I interact with many non-professional historians. I meet with and talk to genealogists, re-enactors, pre-college students, and interested lay persons more than I do with professional historians. I am struck at the respect and even awe that our editions command among these non-professionals. It is good to “feel loved” so my advice to you is to set aside time to speak to non-professional organizations that have an interest in your topic or your area, interact with genealogists, re-enactors, and students. It is really psychically rewarding.

It does not seem that long ago I was a fledgling editor at my first ADE annual meeting. Now I am up here dispensing advice as if I know something. And despite understanding that what we produce is more important than the vast majority of the monographs produced each year, I am still insecure about the place of documentary editing in the academic firmament. Like

Pluto, we seem to be a planetoid and not quite a planet. I know the best of today's historians that I have had contact with, the David McColluch's, the Gordon Wood's, tell me that what we do is many times more important than what others in the historical profession produce, but I still am not sure that we really believe it. The "vibe" within this organization is one of defensiveness. The first step, I believe, in changing how we are perceived is for us to put aside or rather obliterate any self-doubts. When we do that, then we may be able to effect a necessary climate change in the larger academic world. We all need to be a little counter-intuitive.