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## Bringing Method to the Madness: Editing Personal Writings for Public Wonderment

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# Bringing Method to the Madness: Editing Personal Writings for Public Wonderment

Melody Miyamoto

When I attended my first Association for Documentary Editing Annual Meeting, my name tag read “Melody Miyamoto, The Papers of Clara Downes.” “Who is Clara Downes?” people asked me. My reply: “No one famous... yet.” Clara Downes was a single woman who headed west on the Overland Trails in 1860. She may never be famous, nor will she ever leave the kind of legacy that past presidents, politicians, and literary figures have. But she did leave a daily account of her six month adventure. And her personal writings, like so many other women, minorities, and rural people, are in need of sharing with a wider audience. Through this article, I hope to emphasize the worth of studying men and women who have been previously neglected by historians. I present ways to approach editing, annotating, and emending journals and diaries, by offering examples of western women’s writings as models. The advice and suggestions can be applied to anyone’s diary, letters or reminiscences, and the samples and endnotes can serve as references when looking for editing ideas. With this in mind, I challenge readers to find an unpublished diary and start on the adventure that is documentary editing.

The attic holds many treasures about family members and the past, including clothing, photographs, and personal writings. When a person comes across another person’s diary or correspondences, the first question that arises is, “Should I read it?” Many of us, in spite of our own quest for privacy and attempt to uphold standards of ethics, will begin reading even before answering in the affirmative. The diaries, letters and reminiscences that catch our attention hold historical or personal value, and the next step in the discovery process is to then share the diary with others. Whether “others” is defined as family members or the general public is up to the holder

of the diary. But, to those who discover the desire for sharing the personal narrative, I say “Congratulations! You have become a documentary editor.” I encourage historians (professionals and novices) to use the multitude of diaries and recollections and allow men and women to tell their own stories and contribute to the mosaic that is American history. Men and women who were concerned with the trials of their daily lives did not write with the intention of becoming sources for historical research. Their diaries and letters reveal activities, as well as values, hopes, and dreams. These are the treasures that we can uncover as we explore the legacy of “ordinary” people. (A cautionary note: you may find more than you expected, and more details about relatives than you ever wanted to know.) The following pages offer a few words of advice and several models for consultation when working with personal narratives.

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Letters and memoirs show an expectation that others will find their narratives believable....[They] express a sense of immediacy and personal identity. [These] documents reveal human beings in action, responding to their environments and thinking about their lives.<sup>1</sup>

The rise of social history and the movement to study history from the bottom up have led to a greater, more detailed examination of the daily lives of ordinary people. And what better way to learn about “real” experiences than by reading personal writings? As Thomas Mallon writes in *A Book of One's Own: People and their Diaries*, a diary is a “carrier of the private, the everyday, the intriguing, the sordid, the sublime...a chronicle of everything.”<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately for historians and editors, the increasing interest in working with personal documents has prompted several guides to editing manuscripts as historical documents. The starting point, of course, continues to be *Editing Documents and Texts: An Annotated Bibliography* by Beth Luey, Mary-Jo Kline's *A Guide to Documentary Editing*, and Michael E. Stevens and Steven B. Burg's *Editing Historical Documents: A Handbook of Practice*. These guides provide models to follow, suggestions for editing methods, and general rules of editing for readability and describing the methodology.<sup>3</sup> The style and pur-

<sup>1</sup>Ruth Moynihan, Susan Armitage, and Christiane Fischer Dichamp, eds., *So Much to be Done: Women Settlers on the Mining and Ranching Frontier* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), xx.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Mallon, *A Book of One's Own: People and Their Diaries* (Saint Paul: Hungry Mind Press, 1984), 1.

<sup>3</sup>Beth Luey, *Editing Documents and Texts: An Annotated Bibliography* (Madison: Madison House, 1990), Mary-Jo Kline, *A Guide to Documentary Editing* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987), and Michael E. Stevens and Steven B. Burg, *Editing Historical Documents: A Handbook of Practice* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1997).

pose of transcriptions will vary with each diarist, editor, and type of publication. Editors can choose the format and methodology for the diaries, and they can take the process one step further by placing the personal narrative into the larger context of the time in which it was written. Regardless of the lengths to which one wants to present the personal account as a historical commentary, the writings of “ordinary” people contribute to our understanding of history.

When presenting diaries, many editors choose to write an introductory chapter with explanatory footnotes or endnotes to clarify the text. Introductions normally give brief biographical background of the diarists, including their family’s origin, their class, and their education. Editors also contribute to readers’ understanding of the diaries by including footnotes and endnotes. For example, in 1937, Mary Boyton Cowdrey, editor of *The Checkered Years*, used the introduction to give the family history of the diarist, Mary Dodge Woodward, and to explain the history of the people who settled the West as a result of the land grants and homesteading opportunities. Cowdrey also used the introduction to describe the original diary, to explain that Woodward wrote her diary thinking that others would not read it, and to explain the alterations that she, Cowdrey, made to the original text.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of the period in which the diary is written, editors may also use the introduction and footnotes to explain and support their goals for the edition of the diaries.

Other editors manipulate the manuscript to an even greater degree to create a plot or to explain what they find significant about the diary. One may still use a general introduction to state the significance of the diary and to give background information on the diarist, but editors can also choose to divide the diary into sections to stress the changes in experiences as a result of geography, passage of time, and personal experiences. The introduction for each of section should then support the plot and emphasize the evidence that readers may otherwise miss. Examples of these include the work of Judy Nolte Lensink. Her general introduction comments on Victorian women and prescriptive gender ideology, but she also provides introductions to each of the three sections of *“A Secret to Be Buried”*: *The Diary of Emily Hawley Gillespie, 1858–1888*.<sup>5</sup> Lensink determined the three parts of the diary by addressing

<sup>4</sup>Mary Dodge Woodward, *The Checkered Years*, edited by Mary Boyton Cowdrey (Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1937).

<sup>5</sup>Judy Nolte Lensink, ed., *“A Secret to Be Buried”*: *The Diary of Emily Hawley Gillespie, 1858–1888* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), 11.

Gillespie's stages of life. Her annotations to these parts then consist primarily of a comparison of Gillespie to other nineteenth-century women, a discussion of the current historiography of Victorian women, and a conclusion to summarize her findings. Another example can be seen in *Ho For California!* Here, editor Sandra Myres uses her introduction to describe the differences between the Isthmus of Panama Route, the California Trail, and the Southwestern Trails.<sup>6</sup> She gives a brief overview of the geography of each route, the numbers of people who crossed over them, and the hardships of each route over time. She also includes the background of each diarist, mentioning their level of education, their traveling companions, and their original homes. Her footnotes primarily cite other sources which detail and support comments made by the diarists. Editors use introductions to establish the background information to place the experiences of writers into the context in which he or she lived.

Diaries that are too short for books can make successful articles, but need to be presented concisely. "On the Brink of Boom: Southern California in 1877 as Witnessed by Mrs. Frank Leslie," edited by Richard Reinhardt, for example, has no introduction, but includes footnotes giving brief biographies of the people mentioned in the text, explanations of sites mentioned, and histories of places, landmarks, and business ventures.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, William S. Lewis, editor of "Reminiscences of a Pioneer Woman," the diary of Elizabeth Ann Coonc, also does not offer an introduction.<sup>8</sup> However, Lewis does provide footnotes on the people mentioned in the diary, Native American nations, and historical events, such as the Whitman massacre.<sup>9</sup> By providing no introduction, these two editors allow the readers to interpret the text without any preconceived notions shaped by the editors' opinions. The voices of the diarists, not the editors, are heard. These benefit readers who are interested in life in the West, but those who hope for historical analysis will find them lacking.

Most of the diaries published as articles tend to provide introductions setting the context in which the diarist wrote and giving biographical information on the diarists, as well as their family and friends. Articles such as

<sup>6</sup>Sandra L. Myers, ed., *Ho for California!* (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1980).

<sup>7</sup>Richard Reinhardt, ed., "On the Brink of Boom as Witnessed by Mrs. Frank Leslie," *California Historical Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 64-79.

<sup>8</sup>William S. Lewis, ed., "Reminiscences of a Pioneer Woman," *The Washington Historical Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (January 1917): 14-21.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

“Pioneer Migration: The Diary of Mary Alice Shute,” “A Woman’s View of the Texas Frontier, 1874: The Diary of Emily K. Andrews,” and “Rebecca Visits Kansas and the Custers: The Diary of Rebecca Richmond,” also contain introductions that describe the original diary’s appearance.<sup>10</sup> Orvall Baldwin II and Sheldon Jackson, who write about a Mormon bride and a Quaker minister respectively, both use their introductions to address religion.<sup>11</sup> A number of editors, such as Oscar Winther and R. D. Galey, use their introductions to give the present location of the original diary manuscript and to thank the diarists’ family members who allowed them to publish such personal histories.<sup>12</sup> And finally, an editor may choose to conclude the article with summations of the diarists’ lives—where the diarists made their final homes, what happened to them there, and when they died.<sup>13</sup> Most of these articles provide the reader with enough of the original diary to reveal a story about great adventures, and they also facts to place the diaries in historical context.

While most editors tend to augment their diaries with introductions and footnotes, others take the editing process one step further and annotate the diaries. This annotation process usually consists of explanations to help the reader understand the diarists’ entries. Lois Barton, who edited *One Woman’s West: Recollections of the Oregon Trail and Settling the Northwest Country by Martha Gay Masterson 1838–1916*, uses brackets throughout the text to supplement the diary by identifying the people mentioned, explaining slang expressions, and inserting dates.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, *Mary Richardson Walker: Her Book*

<sup>10</sup>Glenda Riley, ed., “Pioneer Migration,” *Annals of Iowa: A Magazine of History* 43 (1975–1977): 487–514, 566–92; Sandra Myers, ed., “A Woman’s View of the Texas Frontier, 1874: The Diary of Emily K. Andrews,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (July 1982): 49–80; and Minnie Dubbs Millbrook, ed., “Rebecca Visits Kansas and the Custers: The Diary of Rebecca Richmond,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (Winter 1976): 367.

<sup>11</sup>Orvall F. Baldwin II, ed., “A Mormon Bride in the Great Migration,” *Nebraska History* 58, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 53–71; Sheldon G. Jackson, ed., “An English Quaker Tours California: The Journal of Sarah Lindsey 1859, 1860,” *Southern California Quarterly* 5, no. 1, 2, and 3 (March, June and September 1969): 1–33, 153–75, and 221–46.

<sup>12</sup>Oscar O. Winther, and R. D. Galey, eds., “Mrs. Butler’s 1853 Diary of Rogue River Valley,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (December 1940): 337–66.

<sup>13</sup>Fleming Fraker Jr., ed., “To Pike’s Peak by Ox Wagon,” *Annals of Iowa: A Magazine of History* 35 (1959–61): 112–48; Donald K. Adams, ed., “The Journal of Ada A. Vodges,” *Montana Magazine of Western History* 13, no. 3 (July 1963): 2–17; Helen Betsy Abbott, ed., “Life on the Lower Columbia, 1853–1866,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 83, no. 3 (September 1982): 248–87.

<sup>14</sup>Lois Barton, ed., *One Woman’s West: Recollections of the Oregon Trail and Settling the Northwest Country by Martha Gay Masterson 1838–1916* (Eugene, OR: Spencer Butte Press, 1986).

contains an amount of editorial comment equal to the text.<sup>15</sup> The annotations in this work give information on Walker's family, guess at what the diarist may have felt, and interpret her passages.<sup>16</sup> Shirley A. Leckie also uses annotations in *The Colonel's Lady on the Western Frontier: The Correspondence of Alice Kirk Grierson*.<sup>17</sup> However, her annotations are mainly to explain the composition of the military units and to inform the reader of the events that affected both Grierson and the larger society. While these help to connect the events in the letters, they comment more on the military men than on Grierson. Overall, these annotations tend to provide more detail than footnotes, but an editor must use caution as the interpretations of the editor intrude into the text.

While annotations reveal more of the editor than do footnotes, some editors choose to become an even larger presence in the text, and their works contain more annotations than actual transcriptions. One example, *Far From Home: Families of the Westward Journey*, by Lillian Schlissel, Byrd Gibbens, and Elizabeth Hampsten, contains more of the editors' comments than actual diary passages.<sup>18</sup> After an introduction that states the purpose of the book and the methodology, each of the editors annotates diary passages as block quotations rather than as the focus of the text. The annotations, which make up the bulk of the book, primarily consist of information on the diarists' families, the land, hardships, society and the ways in which they adjusted to life in the West. Another example, also by Schlissel, is *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*. This work studies the experience of families, and thus women, on the trail over time.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the bulk of her study is a comprehensive summary of the fears, hardships, and experiences of women who crossed the trails in different years. And to illustrate her findings, Schlissel includes the diaries of six women who traveled in different years. These two studies provide transcriptions to support the editors' arguments regarding the hardships of women in the West, rather than to focus on the experiences of the individual women.

<sup>15</sup>Ruth Karr McKee, ed., *Mary Richardson Walker: Her Book* (Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1945).

<sup>16</sup>*Mary Richardson Walker*, 40, 160, and 200.

<sup>17</sup>Shirley A. Leckie, ed., *The Colonel's Lady on the Western Frontier: The Correspondence of Alice Kirk Grierson* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).

<sup>18</sup>Lillian Schlissel, Byrd Gibbens, and Elizabeth Hampsten, eds., *Far From Home: Families of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989).

<sup>19</sup>Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982).

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According to the guides on editing, editors should note the methodology used in their editing and transcribing processes. One choice is to not make any emendations to the transcriptions. Editors often explain that they have kept the original spelling, punctuation and grammar of the diarists. However, editors can still make several other types of changes to the diaries. For example, Ruth Karr McKee states, “the words here published were written, for the most part, a century ago,” while at the same time, she disregards the “minutiae of date and place...unless essential to the thought.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Francis Haines, who left the original spelling in the diary in tact, explains that he does not quote the diary in full.<sup>21</sup> Mary Cowdrey also claims she made “no departure from the...tone of the language of the original,” but she does admit to correcting several poems that the diarist had copied into the diary.<sup>22</sup> Cowdrey then changed them to match the original published versions. These three editors have tried to remain true to the diarists by providing transcriptions of the entries as they were written, yet because they omit passages, one cannot help but wonder how “true” they really are. The editor’s preferences determine the type and extent of emendations, but the editor should clearly explain what those choices are.

Commonly, editors choose to make minimal emendations to the documents, the majority of which are intended to enhance the readability of the diaries. Editors may state that they kept their editing to a minimum, changing spelling only if the original was misleading, and adding punctuation only for clarity.<sup>23</sup> Others opt to keep the original spelling and usage of words, but warn of an occasional use of “sic” to indicate misspelled words and factual errors in the diary.<sup>24</sup> And others still choose not to correct spelling and punctuation on the grounds that the mistakes and habits of the diarists reveal their manners, thoughts, and background.<sup>25</sup> Another view is to keep the period spelling but corrects obvious spelling errors.<sup>26</sup> While all editors take liberties

<sup>20</sup> *Mary Richardson Walker*, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Francis D. Haines, Jr. *A Bride on the Bozeman Trail: The Letters and Diary of Ellen Gordon Fletcher 1866* (Medford, OR: Gandee Printing Center, Inc., 1970), x.

<sup>22</sup> *The Checkered Years*, 12, 13.

<sup>23</sup> *Far From Home*, xvii, *So Much to be Done*, xx.

<sup>24</sup> “A Secret to be Buried”, xxiii.

<sup>25</sup> *Women’s Diaries*, Kenneth Holmes, ed., *Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails 1840–1890* (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1983); Christiane Fischer, *Let Them Speak for Themselves: Women in the American West 1849–1900* (Hamden, CT: Shoe String Press, Inc., 1977).

<sup>26</sup> *Caroline Kirkland, A New Home, Who’ll Follow? Or Glimpses of Western Life*, Sandra A. Zagarell, ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), li.



with their emendations, the trend today is to stay close to the originals, in hopes of analyzing the writing conventions and educational background, thus allowing the reader to learn more about the diarists. Editors reveal the voices of diarists, but transcriptions can leave the reader wondering how closely the published accounts follow the originals. A sentence or two on the methodology used in transcribing can answer this question, but most editors omit this, and the reader is left wondering how reliable the transcriptions are.

Editors who incorporate a liberal approach and make a variety of editorial changes should clearly establish their methodology. For example, Oscar Winther and Rose Galey claim that they present the diary of Mrs. Butler without changes.<sup>27</sup> But they also state that they arranged the presentation of the diary entries in a uniform manner, making all the entries look the same by placing the date in the same location for each entry. They also added chapter and division titles. Leo Kaiser and Priscilla Knuth edited the journal of Rebecca Ketchum for readability.<sup>28</sup> They kept the original spelling and capitalization, but created paragraphs and added punctuations to aid in the reading of the journal. Helen Betsy Abbott edited the diary of Lydia P.W. Plimpton and retained the original spelling but changed punctuation and capitalization to clarify the writer's meaning.<sup>29</sup> Sheldon Jackson, the editor of Sarah Lindsey's journal, offers a different point of view. He does not address any emendations that he may have made to the diary, but he does say that he omits the personal and religious passages that were not necessary for understanding Lindsey's experiences in California, and he also supplies the full names of people when only initials were provided in the original.<sup>30</sup> Overall, these editors have altered the diaries by setting a standard format for each entry, and by taking liberties with the content rather than the grammar.

A combination of methodological approaches may work best for editing an original document. Editors who do minimal emendations to the diaries capture the flavor of the time in which the diarists wrote. The diaries that reveal the most about the writers are the ones that are not altered. Spelling, grammar and punctuation indicate the customs of the time and the educa-

<sup>27</sup>"Mrs. Butler's 1853 Diary," 338.

<sup>28</sup>Leo Kaiser and Priscilla Knuth, eds., "From Ithaca to Clatsop Plains: Miss Ketcham's Journal of Travel," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 42, no. 3 and 4 (September and December 1961): 237-87 and 337-402.

<sup>29</sup>"Life on the Lower Columbia," 250.

<sup>30</sup>"An English Quaker Tours California," 8.

tion level of the individuals. Granted, diaries must be presented to readers in a form that is readable and understandable. Yet this can be done without “butchering” the text. The frequent use of “sic” is distracting. Instead, the editors may choose to simply indicate whether the spelling in the text is the original. Editors often choose to make corrections only if the original presentation is confusing. It is helpful, however, to indicate these changes in brackets next to the original spelling, allowing the reader to see the grammar conventions used by the diarist. When emending diaries, editors must find a balance between the character of the original and an accessible transcription.

While narratives are often interesting to read, editors must go an extra step further if they would like their diaries to be useful for studying gender. Numerous diaries of women have already been edited, and many specifically state the ways in which the diaries can be considered for gender analysis. Both “From Ithaca to Clatsop: Miss Ketcham’s Journal of Travel” and “Roughing It on Her Kansas Claim: The Diary of Abbie Bright” comment on the hardships of being single women in the West. By addressing the restrictions put on the two women, as well as by addressing society’s reactions to them, the editors make these works significant for studying the gender conventions of the nineteenth-century West.<sup>31</sup> A more thorough presentation comes from Judy Nolte Lensink. In her introduction, she states that she addresses the “daily interaction between an individual woman and prescriptive gender ideology.” She does this by examining what Gillespie thinks she should be doing, what she actually does, and how she reconciles the two.<sup>32</sup> These three areas should be addressed in annotations if one wishes to emphasize the diary’s potential for gender analysis. By doing so, the editors address the ideals, the realities, and the significance of women’s actions, thoughts, and feelings. Editions of Western women’s writings look at women for more than their daily routines. They dispel the stereotype of the Western woman, examine the contributions made by these women, address the hardships that women faced because of their gender, and even recognize the agency of women to shape not only their lives, but also the character of new societies in the West. By reading between the lines, editors can depict women as subjects worthy of study, rather than objects set in the background.

<sup>31</sup>“From Ithaca To Clatsop Plains,” and Joseph Snell ed, “Roughing it on Her Kansas Claim: The Diary of Abbie Bright, 1870–1871,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 37, no. 2 and 3 (Summer and Autumn 1971): 233–68 and 394–428.

<sup>32</sup>“A Secret to be Buried,” xxi.

Editors, who are fortunate enough to find unpublished diaries, have several choices to make before they publish the diaries. These choices include how much of the diary to publish, what to include in the introduction, what kind of annotations, if any, to make, whether to use footnotes or endnotes, what methodology to use for editing and emending, and what other types of information (such as glossaries, gazetteers and acknowledgements) to include. The guides for editing and for working with personal writings, as well as the numerous previously published diaries, give editors a multitude of resources to consult. Because edited works reveal the goals of the editor as well as the experiences of the diarists, no two editors choose exactly the same methods. Editing, emending and annotating all work to present the diary in a readable form that captures the spirit of the diarist as well as the historical significance of the documents.

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The following is a transcription of a page (the left side) from Clara Downes's diary, using the following methodology: I standardized the placement of dates and included the day of the week, added punctuations to separate sentences, and capitalized the first letter of each sentence. I also retained the original spelling and underlined emphasis. The words in bold and underlined are ones that she underlined twice or three times. The extensive use of brackets and [sic] is distracting. Thus, I have used these as little as possible. On the rare occasion where words were missing or misleading to the understanding of the passage, I added words, indicating so in brackets. I chose these words based on the previous transcriptions and also based on my knowledge of Downes and the overland trails. "Sic" is never used, and the reader should assume that all unconventional spelling and grammar were the originals of the diarist. Explanatory footnotes are omitted here.

Some of the horses has given out &  
it is I doubtful if their some of them  
ever see the other side. They look  
very thin & weak. The caravan  
is about ready to start on our first  
trip on a desert.

July 16, 1860- Monday

We left our mountain home at 5 OC  
& started for the dreary desert. Mary  
& I walked till dark, it is not sandy  
as I expected, but hard & dusty in

places, as it grew dark it became so gloomy. Mountains are scattered over its surface, occasionally we would pass on when it would become very dark. I sat in front of the wagon & tried to while away the time by humming all of the old familiar airs. I knew then even that brought to mind “old times” happy times that I had had at home. Then I would be obliged to stop, for I could not sing then & laid down but could not sleep.

