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The Editor as Biographer

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John P. Kaminski

I. Writing Biography in the Documentary Edition

Editors are really *biographers of sorts* almost all the time when editing the papers of their subjects. All meaningful characters who appear in documentary editions are usually identified in footnotes and headnotes, biographical directories, introductions, and sometimes even in indexes. No one knows the subject—the person being studied—as well as the documentary editor. Day in and day out editors pore over their documents intently, attempting to make sense of the interrelationships among all the historical participants. As part of their responsibility, editors explain the intricacies and uncertainties in these relationships.

Editors also serve as *surrogate biographers* by letting their subjects tell their own stories. No matter how great a biographer Dumas Malone is of Jefferson, or James T. Flexner is of Washington, or Arthur Link is of Woodrow Wilson, they all pale in comparison to Thomas Jefferson as the autobiographer of Thomas Jefferson, George Washington of George Washington, or Woodrow Wilson of Woodrow Wilson. Editors of institutions like the Continental and Confederation congresses (Paul H. Smith's *Letters of the Delegates to Congress*), and the First Federal Congress (Charlene Bangs Bickford and Kenneth R. Bowling's *Documentary History of the First Federal Congress*) let their subjects become collective biographers or better yet, collective autobiographers.

The traditional biographer can fail—can misinterpret—can misconstrue, and most importantly, the biographer never has the complete story. But that is never the case with the historical figures themselves telling their own stories. With them, they usually have an overabundance of information. This does not mean to say that historical figures never err in telling their own stories, especially when they reconstruct long past events from memory. Thomas Jefferson believed that private correspondence was the best historical evidence because, being “the less guarded in these, because not meant for the public eye, not restrained by the respect due to that; but *poured forth*

from the overflowings of the heart into the bosom of a friend, as a momentary easement of our feelings. In this way,” private correspondence, “sometimes with warmth, often with prejudice, but always, as we believed, adhering to truth,” told their side of the story.¹

Jefferson felt that “The letters I have written while in public office are in fact memorials of the transactions with which I have been associated, and may at a future day furnish something to the historian.”² As an old man of 80, Jefferson looked back on his life and was not terribly upset that he had not written either a full-length autobiography or a comprehensive narrative of his times. He felt that his “letters (all preserved) will furnish the daily occurrences and views from my return from Europe in 1790, till I retired from office. These will command more conviction than anything I could have written after my retirement; no day having ever passed during that period without a letter to somebody, written too in the moment, and *in the warmth and freshness of fact and feeling* they will carry internal evidence that what they breathe is genuine. Selections from these after my death, may come out successively as the maturity of circumstances may render their appearance seasonable.”³

As valuable as these first-hand accounts are, they naturally are almost always biased because they are written by interested participants who often played partisan roles in the events they narrate. Therefore other methods of writing biographies must be used as well.

II. Beyond the Edition:

Other Ways the Editor Becomes a Biographer

The book-length biography and the biographical essay are the traditional methods of writing biography. Sometimes these studies examine the entire life of the subject; sometimes only a portion. Documentary editors have written excellent biographies of their documentary subjects—Bob Rutland on James Madison; Ernie Cooke on Alexander Hamilton; Chuck Hobson on Madison and John Marshall; Arthur Link on Woodrow Wilson; Charlene Bickford, Ken Bowling, and Helen Veit on the First Federal Congress, and so on. Sometimes the sequence is reversed when the biographer subsequently becomes the editor. Scholars such as Louis Harlan on Booker T. Washington,

¹To John Adams, Monticello, 27 June 1813, in Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1959), 336. Italics added.

²To William Short, Monticello, 5 May 1816, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress.

³To William Johnson, Monticello, 4 March 1823, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress. Italics added.

Merrill Peterson on James Madison, Candace Falk on Emma Goldman, and Denton Watson on Clarence Mitchell have made such a transition.

Repeatedly, documentary editors are asked to write biographical entries for encyclopedias. Who better to write a brief biographical essay? Some editors have even edited or written their own encyclopedias for their subjects. Bob Rutland edited an encyclopedia on James Madison, and Frank Grizzard did a fantastic job of writing a one-volume encyclopedia on George Washington.

Editors can make oral presentations on their subject. Service clubs, social and dinner groups, retirement centers, church groups, and so on, are always looking for interesting speakers. People enjoy biographical presentations. Presentations of the same basic subject but of varying lengths can be given. I have given presentations on George Washington ranging from ten minutes to three hours, or on James Madison from thirty minutes to week-end retreats for high school teachers and even for justices of state supreme courts. The subject can take on different permutations—John Adams in Europe, John Adams on Religion, John Adams's Conflict with Alexander Hamilton, and so on. When enough of these variations are prepared they can be strung together in print as a biographical study.

A variety of public and commercial radio shows (especially in university communities) welcome biographical presentations. Rich Leffler and I have done eight such presentations together as a team for "University of the Air," a weekly program on public radio in Madison, Wisconsin. I have done ten other presentations alone. All eighteen presentations were biographical. They are quick to do, they reach a different and sometimes broad audience, they don't need all the elaborate editorial apparatus required in an academically published paper, and they have a long life because the shows are usually taped and re-broadcast. The tapes also have a life of their own because they can be purchased by the general public and for classroom use.

Quotation books are in their own way biographies. They often serve as a precursor to a more formal biography. There is no better way to become familiar with your subject than to glean choice quotations out of the mass of that person's writings. Documentary editors are well placed to search the subject's writings and to choose appropriate quotations to illustrate a wide variety of topics. David Mattern has compiled an excellent quotation book on James Madison. I have done three such books on Jefferson and one on Thomas Paine. Not only are these quotation books a type of biography, but they serve as valuable research tools for scholars (including biographers) and non-scholars interested in the person under study.

III. Advice to Editors Who Would Be Biographers: Ten Hints

•Abandon the Editorial Style

My philosophy of editing (probably similar to most of yours) is that editors ought to eschew interpretation and should provide only enough annotation to make their documents understandable. As editors, we should not tell all we know about a particular topic; only what the reader needs to know to understand the document. The biographer's perspective is totally different. Biographers hypothesize, make generalizations, speculate, fill the space left by missing documents with their best, well-thought-out guesses. Good biographers capture some larger historical themes and illustrate these with interesting vignettes that reveal the character and the foibles of their subject. So take off the editor's hat and put on the biographer's chapeau.

•Read Other Biographies

Read biographies in your field, your time period, and particularly on your subject. Pulitzer Prize recipient Ted Kooser, the poet laureate of the United States, advises young poets to read poetry. He encourages his students to read twenty poems for every one they try to write.⁴ Learning by example can be effective. We don't always have to know the rules; we can see how the game is played—how others succeed or fail. It's valuable to read good works and bad as long as we can tell the difference. We can learn from both.

•Follow the Documents; Write from the Documents

The good biographer adheres to the documents as a guide or road map. This does not mean stringing a series of quotations together or summarizing one document after another in your biography; rather it means that you mine the documents, faithfully assaying the precious nuggets found in your documentary ore. It means having the documents before you when you write so that everything in the documents can be considered—so that fine nuances will not be overlooked because they are out of sight at the time of writing.

When I wrote my biography of George Clinton, the first governor of New York, I embraced the documents. The pertinent volume of the ten published volumes of Clinton's public papers was always examined whenever writing on any topic. In fact, I photocopied hundreds of pages from these published public papers so that I could annotate the photocopies and interfile these

⁴Interview on "The Nightly News," re-broadcast on 8 April 2005.

pages chronologically with photocopied manuscripts. When I did research throughout the country, I never took notes from the relevant documents I found. That would have slowed down the research. Instead, I photocopied all the relevant documents found and brought the photocopies home. When it came time to write, I arranged all of the photocopied documents chronologically and read them. In the margins, I annotated each paragraph indicating the topic it addressed. When writing on a particular subject, all the documents with relevant material were pulled together and followed closely as I wrote the section. When finished writing on that topic, I drew a red line through the paragraph used and then re-filed the documents to be examined for the next topic.

The importance of having the entire photocopied document instead of selected notes taken while researching in the field soon became apparent. Repeatedly I found that topics I had not thought about during the research process became important when I was writing. For instance, I had not planned to write on the severe illness of Clinton's daughter Maria in Washington City in 1806–7 when her father was serving as vice president under Thomas Jefferson. But it was that illness that forced Clinton and his partially-recovered daughter to return to New York aboard a U.S. revenue cutter rather than their usual overland travel by carriage. While on the voyage, a British man-of-war fired upon the vice president's ship. When President Jefferson heard of the incident, he was incensed and wanted Clinton to report fully to him. Sensing the ramifications, Clinton never made the report. It would have been difficult for the president to avoid a war message to Congress given the provocation. Knowing the country's ill-preparedness (especially New York's), Clinton discreetly failed to make a formal report, the incident aroused little public attention, and the president soon realized that it would be unwise to go to war. Having all the documents on Maria's illness allowed me to describe the full story in two short paragraphs that probably never would have been written had I relied exclusively on notes taken on preconceived topics while doing research.

•Start Out Strong

Beginnings are important. They form first impressions. They might determine whether your biography is published or not, is purchased or not, is read or not. Start out strongly in the introduction, in the first chapter, and even in each paragraph. Look at Thomas Paine's writings. Every paragraph of this great writer's work has a topic sentence that blasts forth, making it virtually impossible not to read the rest of the paragraph. Obviously there are

few writers as gifted as Paine. But follow the example of great writers as best you can and pay particular attention to your “beginnings.” Go over them repeatedly to improve them. I wrote and re-wrote the key paragraph in the introduction to my book on Thomas Paine. I hope it will interest, intrigue, and entice the reader.

Paine was a paradox. He turned a life of abysmal failure into phenomenal success, only to die pathetically lonely and neglected. He was a tolerant man of good will who lived every day as a rabid partisan. A pensive philosopher, he was ever the zealot driven to action. A gentle man of peace, he regularly wrote sedition and inspired men to take up arms in the cause of liberty. He came to be a symbol of rebellion and civil unrest, yet he was an ardent opponent of insurrection and was a staunch advocate of law and order. He refused to profit financially from his God-given talents as a writer, yet he felt betrayed when his country refused to reward him financially for his “selfless” services. A deeply religious man, he was condemned as an atheist and blasphemer. He advocated harmony but lived a dissolute and disheveled life. He fervently sought the peace, stability, and enjoyment of a quiet life, but was continually immersed in scandal, conflict, and the vicissitudes of war. Though an eternal optimist, he was also a skeptic. He made friends easily, but lost them with even greater facility. A fervent spokesman for limited government, he was a sincere proponent of social welfare programs for the poor, the infirm, and the aged. Paine was a citizen of three countries, yet truly a man without a country—although to his own way of thinking, he was a citizen of the world.⁵

•Use Subheadings as Transitions

Transitions are important in any kind of writing. If you cannot write smooth, graceful transitions, use subheadings instead. In fact, subheadings are often advantageous in that they clearly show breaks, they tell the reader what topic follows, and they allow somewhat discrete topics to be grouped together in a chapter yet still maintain a degree of separateness. My George Clinton biography has six chapters that all have multiple subchapters. Forty-three subchapters in all, unconnected by transitions, are introduced by consecutively numbered subheadings. This unusual technique of consecu-

⁵John P. Kaminski, comp. and ed., *Citizen Paine: Thomas Paine's Thoughts on Man, Government, Society, and Religion* (Lanham, MD, 2002), 2.

tively-numbering the subchapters tends to soften the chapter breaks by making the statement that the book—and Clinton’s life—is divided into forty-three sections.

•Have Empathy

A good editor, a good biographer, a good historian—a good human being for that matter—must have empathy. Twenty years ago the Adams Papers sought to hire a new editor-in-chief. I thought about applying for the job, but decided against it largely because at that time I felt no empathy for John Adams. That’s no longer true. I’ve gotten to know John Adams better—I also know more about the times in which he lived—and I have great empathy for him. *I also have come to have great empathy for Abigail.*

What exactly is empathy? Well, when doing research several years ago on “The Founding Fathers on the Founding Fathers”⁶ I searched the twenty-five volumes of Paul Smith’s *Letters of the Delegates to Congress*. To make things a little different, I decided to search the volumes backwards—from Volume 25 to Volume 1. Each individual volume, however, was read normally from page one to the end. In one volume I saw that a delegate to Congress died rather unpleasantly after being inoculated for smallpox. When reading the previous volume, I came across a letter in which the delegate contemplated getting inoculated. I tried to warn him; I pleaded with him, “Don’t get inoculated!” Unfortunately, my message didn’t get through and the delegate took the inoculation and, sure enough, died. That is empathy. Being one with your subject. Understanding your subject—the dilemmas they faced. It does not mean that you blindly accept everything your subject says or discount everything your subject’s enemies say. Rather, you try to understand why they said what they said and why they did what they did.

•Create a Commonplace Book

Jefferson, at the age of 57, said that he had “read a good deal . . . & commonplac’d what I read. This common-place has been my pillar.”⁷ A commonplace book serves the editor well as an informal index—one that grows incrementally—not necessarily steadily like a rolling snowball or a ball of yarn. Rather a commonplace book grows like a paper maché doll. Each entry in the commonplace book is like a strip of moistened paper being applied to the head, the torso, the arms and the legs. At first you have single

⁶“The Founding Fathers on the Founding Fathers” is a project of mine compiling quotations from primary sources in which contemporaries describe the character, mannerisms and physical and intellectual qualities of the Founding generation.

⁷To George Wythe, Philadelphia, 28 February 1800, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress.

entries for a variety of topics. Then a second and a third entry is added for this topic and that. Each entry approaches the topic differently—some dramatically different; others with minimal changes in nuance. Soon your three, four or five entries can be woven into an interesting paragraph or series of paragraphs on a particular subject. Although each entry has interest, the entries taken together provide more impact, more continuity, more subtlety, and simply a better picture of the person and the issue. In my Jefferson quotation book (which can be construed as a commonplace book with Jefferson as the topic), I have pieced together six quotations on Cuba—two written late in Jefferson’s administration, two early in Madison’s administration, and two in Monroe’s administration. Each statement is unique and worthwhile, but the six together give us far more—a picture of Jefferson’s evolving attitudes on Cubans, on American “manifest destiny,” on the American navy, on Spain, and on Great Britain.

What a wonderful way to learn about an individual. Build a biography—one entry at a time. The documents, in essence, tell the story. You—the editor—the biographer—merely weave them together into patterns of thinking and acting that provide new insights. This is what Joel Barlow described when he said of Thomas Paine, that his “own writings are his best life.”⁸ If you want to know who Tom Paine was, go to my *Citizen Paine* book and you’ll get a pretty good picture of Paine—partly from the introduction, which mines Paine’s works, but primarily from the hundreds of quotations on almost 500 different topics. Words capture the ideas of Tom Paine and what he was all about. The essence of Tom Paine is found in his own words.

•Use Vignettes

If a picture is worth a thousand words, so is a vignette. Stories told by contemporaries can give the flavor of the times and a sense of person. We can picture the personal physical strength of George Washington after reading Charles Willson Peale’s account of his visit to Mount Vernon in 1774. Peale and other young men were demonstrating their prowess by tossing the bar, an early form of shot putting. When Colonel Washington appeared and the heavy iron weight was put into his hand, Peale said that the earth lost all its gravitational pull. Without taking off his coat, Washington effortlessly threw the bar far, very far, much farther than anyone else. As he walked away, Washington casually said that he would try a little harder when anyone approached his distance.⁹

⁸Quoted in Kaminski, *Citizen Paine*, 1.

⁹Quoted in John P. Kaminski, *George Washington: “The Man of the Age”* (Madison, Wis., 2004), 15–16.

- Use Quotations

Quotations provide borrowed eloquence. Good quotations can have a magical quality. They can and should express emotion. They can give insights unavailable in other ways. They can make us *feel* the times, the mood, and the setting. When, during the French and Indian War, Washington says that he heard the “bullets whistle” and that he “found something charming in the sound,” it gives us a real sense of the danger that he was exposed to as well as his courage and sense of invulnerability.¹⁰ We get a clear sense of John Adams’s irascibility when Jefferson writes that: “He hates Franklin, he hates Jay, he hates the French, he hates the English. To whom will he adhere? His vanity is a lineament in his character which had entirely escaped me. His want of taste I had observed. Notwithstanding all this he has a sound head on substantial points, and I think he has integrity. I am glad therefore that he is of the [peace] commission & expect he will be useful in it. His dislike of all parties, and all men, by balancing his prejudices, may give the same fair play to his reason as would a general benevolence of temper. At any rate honesty may be extracted even from poisonous weeds.”¹¹ President Washington’s last sentence in responding to the U.S. Senate’s response to his inaugural address gives a real sense of what the entire Founding generation was all about. “I readily engage with you in the arduous but pleasing task, of attempting to make a nation happy.”¹² You can feel the ardor in Jefferson’s letter to Maria Cosway as he prepared to leave Europe to return his daughters to America. “When wafting on the bosom of the ocean I shall pray it to be as calm and smooth as yours to me.”¹³ Now, doesn’t that arouse feelings?

- Have a Sounding Board and an Editor

Editing is usually a collaborative venture; writing biography is not—most often it is a very solitary experience. Having a sounding board with whom you can discuss interpretations and ideas during the writing stage is extremely beneficial. Having a good editor is also essential. I don’t mean a

¹⁰Ibid., 14.

¹¹Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, Baltimore, 14 February 1783, William T. Hutchinson and William M. E. Rachal, eds., *The Papers of James Madison* (Chicago, 1969), VI, 235–36.

¹²George Washington to the United States Senate, New York, 18 May 1789, Dorothy Twohig, ed., *The Papers of George Washington: Presidential Series* (Charlottesville, VA, 1987), II, 324.

¹³Thomas Jefferson to Maria Cosway, Paris, 21 May 1789, John P. Kaminski, ed., *Jefferson in Love: The Love Letters Between Thomas Jefferson & Maria Cosway* (Madison, WI, 1999), 121.

publisher's copy editor, although that person can certainly be invaluable. It is important to have an editor to critique your work before it is submitted to the publisher—an editor who knows the history and knows how to improve your writing. Everyone's writing can be improved with the right editor, for, as John Jay wrote: "Authors, like parents, are not among the first to discover imperfections in their offspring."¹⁴

If editors can break away from the invisible constraints that bind them—constraints required to be a good editor—they will find that writing biography can be a liberating intellectual experience.

¹⁴John Jay to Richard Peters, Bedford, NY, 29 March 1811, Henry P. Johnston, ed., *The Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay* (4 vols., New York, 1891), IV, 354.