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A Unique Perspective: Documentary Editors and Biography

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David B. Mattern

Documentary editors are attracted to and often bemused and irritated by biography (and biographers). They have a unique perspective on this genre that I'm going to explore through the prism of my own experience as a biographer and a documentary editor. I've been an editor for nearly twenty years and in that time have written or collaborated on four biographical projects—a biography of Revolutionary War general Benjamin Lincoln, a selected letters edition of Dolley Payne Madison, and two children's biographies of Dolley and James Madison.

The Lincoln biography was my dissertation and grew directly out of my work at the Papers of Robert Morris. I was surprised that a person who figured so largely in that edition hadn't been written about more. So after exploring the sources (principally, 13 reels of microfilm containing the Lincoln Papers), I decided to give biography a try. (This despite the response of one prominent scholar who, when I wrote to him about my plans, wrote back that perhaps there was a very good reason why no one had written a Lincoln biography.)

When I presented my dissertation prospectus to my advisor, Bob McCaughey, who had written a biography for his dissertation, he gave me some hard-won advice. He told me I would run into people who would insist that a good biography was nearly impossible to write, that the theoretical underpinnings of biography as a genre were in turmoil, that the mere accretion of detail about the subject (something that doctoral students do very well) would make a terrible biography, while, on the other hand, wild speculation about the subject would make it farcical. In short, his advice was, to borrow a phrase from Nike: "Just Do It." Don't listen to the nay-sayers and don't think too much about what you're doing. A biography is a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end—there is no more to it than that. I've

adhered religiously to his advice over the years—until I sat down to write this talk.

That's not to say that I gave no thought as to how a particular project should be shaped. I spent hours talking with my co-editor Holly Shulman about how we should approach our Dolley Madison letters book—what we hoped to achieve and how that would be reflected in its structure. And when I undertook a children's biography of James Madison, that required an entirely different set of assumptions, as well as following strict rules governing vocabulary and topic choices.

But it was enough to carry out these projects by telling the story as clearly, artfully, and with as much explanatory power as I could muster. Thinking about biography as a genre and its place in the cliosophian heavens was not on my agenda.

But on reflection, I think documentary editors do have a unique perspective on biography. I think training as an editor makes us better readers and writers of biographies, even as it poses some particular problems for us. So here are a few random thoughts on the special relationship between editors and biographers.

•Every biography falls short.

It is somewhat of a standing joke at the Madison Papers that there is no such thing as a good biography. The simple reason is that there is always something we want to know that biographies don't tell us. How many times have you looked for the youngest daughter of six children only to find her unnamed? Or the birth and death dates of the president's errant brother? Or the unnamed clerk toiling in the bowels of the Treasury Department? The biographer doesn't know, or if he does, he doesn't have room to tell us. It's not critical for his story. For us it's crucial; for him, it's just clutter.

Some months after my Lincoln biography came out, an editor at the Washington Papers asked me if I had any information about one of Lincoln's aides who had served at Saratoga. To my shame (as an editor), I didn't. As a biographer, though, it just hadn't been important to know much about that man. My focus had been elsewhere.

Unlike the documentary editor, the biographer has to shape his story out of the universe of available and relevant detail, not by piling up facts or retelling every anecdote, but by choosing the "telling" detail, the bit of information that illuminates the point he is trying to make. Hence the endless search for unseen sources, facts and details previously ignored or unknown, that bring to light facets of character or career never before noted or

described in just that way. Hence, also, the effort to construct a narrative that will pull the reader through the information in a logical, yet compelling, way.

Editors make choices too—in a selected edition they choose what documents to print, what to discard, and what to calendar. In a comprehensive edition they choose what to annotate and how much. But editors are tied to each document in ways that biographers are not. This can be a disadvantage to biographers, as we'll see, but more often it allows them to sustain an argument or a narrative without the distraction of endless digressions.

•Every documentary editor brings high expectations to biographies.

Biographies are often disappointing. Editors know the documentary record so well, in many cases better than the biographer, that they are difficult to please. Moreover, editors are inveterate footnote and bibliography readers. They are so in tune with their sources that they can often sniff out a twisted quotation or how an author has mangled the context of a particular citation. If a biography is well-written and gets its subject right, it often lacks detail. Worse yet, the text and notes are often filled with mistakes and the overall impression is one of sloppiness. Here's a case in point:

Recently, the Madison Papers staff had been anticipating the release of a biography of a second rank figure of the Early Republic who played a not inconsiderable role in the foreign policy of the Jefferson administration. We were hoping for a book that we could cite in our annotations—a source that reflected the skill of a scholar who had worked through the documents and had filled some of the lacunae, perhaps by using primary materials that we weren't aware of. No such luck. Not only did the biographer not solve any mysteries, he barely got anything right. A silly, but telling, mistake was his identifying the U.S. consul Isaac Cox Barnet as Isaac Coe Barrett. Instead of a thickly textured discussion of his subject's role in the administration, there was the barest outline of events with rather outsized claims for his subject's effectiveness. What added insult to injury was that the biographer complained of a paucity of primary sources while ignoring almost completely the correspondence his subject exchanged with Madison that was printed in our volumes.

These kinds of biographies are discouraging in any number of ways, but particularly because documentary editions are one of the prime sources for biographers of all stripes. Even so-called political editions, devoted to the papers of one man or woman, are replete with details about the social life of the times—financial, agricultural, maritime, etiquette, literary, and emotional details—that are grist for the biographer's mill. Popular writers have been

quick to take advantage of our publications—one thinks quickly of David McCullough’s terrific use of the Adams Papers in his biography of John Adams. Academic writers have been less interested or aware, despite an avalanche of publicity aimed their way. The best academic biographers—Edmund Morgan on Benjamin Franklin and Joseph Ellis in his character studies of Jefferson and Washington—are obvious exceptions. Still, too many historians, political scientists, and others who should know better, remain wedded to older editions, secondary sources, and now, the Internet, with results that are, by documentary editing standards, at best shoddy and at worst scandalous. Even when scholars use our volumes, they do so selectively, often ignoring evidence that complicates or negates the argument they are trying to make.

If the best biographers aim to cull only the crucial details to tell their stories, editors have the opposite problem: *Editors know too much*. Editors can spend 18 months preparing six months worth of documents for publication. Ask me anything about James Madison’s life from 1 April to 31 August 1804. The focus is intense; the tunnel vision is severe. We want to know *everything* that happened during that short time. Every little detail is the grist for our mill. Consequently we are often too close to the facts—there are so many delightful discoveries—and sometimes the plethora of information makes it difficult to recognize the “telling” detail.

When an editor takes on a biography, one of the dangers he faces is the tendency to substitute a pile of facts for argument.

Another danger is that the writer sticks too closely to his sources. Editors are such sticklers for getting things right, that our tendency is to rely on our sources too much, to hesitate to make judgments and speculate a bit from the written record. This “one damn thing after another” approach leads to what John Garraty, a professor of mine from Columbia called, “works devoid of interpretation and thus of meaning.” Documentary editors, whose knowledge of their subject’s papers is vast, are particularly aware of this problem. I mention one example from personal experience. In Irving Brant’s biography of James Madison, there are whole passages where you can follow the writer as he pages through the Madison collection at the Library of Congress, document by document. This happened, then this, then that. The narrative is document-driven, rather than driven by a sense of the overall trajectory of the story. This can be deadly for the reader.

A third danger, and one that is common to biographers and editors alike, is to so identify with your subject that the dictum “Speak of me as I am”

becomes more like what Jefferson wrote to Madison late in life, “Take care of me when dead.” Biographers choose their subjects for any number of reasons—they admire them, they fall into the task because there is a demand for it, they seek promotion or tenure—but rarely do they write a biography because they hate the man or woman they propose to depict. (Here again there are exceptions—Robert Caro on Robert Moses and LBJ, for example). Still, we all must be particularly careful to give full exposure to the dark side of our subject’s character or career. Editors, in particular, because they are working “for the ages,” have to annotate with an eye to neutral language and objectivity. Glossing over or justifying behavior that in its time and context was bad sticks out in a narrative like a sore thumb. Better for editors and biographers alike to use those occasions to explore what it was that made their subject petty, mean, or act in such disreputable ways.

If these are pitfalls that editors turning to biography must avoid, what special advantages do documentary editors bring to biography? One that we’ve mentioned is that editors are constitutionally unable to ignore primary sources. It’s surprising how many biographies these days manage to do that.

Second, editors have the ability to read documents. Biography, like history, requires the “close reading” of documents. Careful distinctions have to be made according to the context in which quotations appear. Were the words written in a public or private context? Were they written in the midst of a political crisis or for a political purpose? Were the views expressed consistent or inconsistent with views otherwise noted over the subject’s career?

My co-editor Holly Shulman has invested the term “*close reading*” with almost magical properties, but reading documents is nearly a lost art among historians. And yet it is what documentary editors do. They date undated manuscripts, they identify unknown correspondents, and they annotate obscure people and events mentioned in their texts. They solve puzzles, by unlocking the evidence in their documents. They provide context for complicated events. Above all, they are committed to getting it right. Biographers can afford to skip a difficult document if it appears not to be central to their story. What documentary editor can do that? A document, however fragmentary, has to go somewhere in an edition. And my experience in documentary editing has been that the greatest mysteries have led to the greatest discoveries; the greatest challenges have led to the greatest satisfactions.

I’m reminded of some third-party comments I received from a graduate student in medieval history whom we had hired to do some transcribing. It

reminds me a great deal of what biographers and historians are missing when they ignore documentary editions. The student, initially skeptical about the value of these kinds of projects, wrote some weeks into his work with us:

This Madison project thing is great. I am glad to be doing it. What amazes me is that we have all of these grad. students in American history, any one of whom ought to be able to find a really great dissertation topic in about 15 minutes with the sources I work with for the Madison Papers. Unbelievable that one of them is not begging to do this job. If we had a collection of correspondence from say Althusius or Balduin or Melanchthon or Charles V or whoever at our fingertips, do you think that we would just shrug our shoulders and let some American historian learn all the stuff we should know???

My conclusion is a simple one. As a biographer, there is no greater luxury or a better platform from which to work than a documentary edition. In addition, I think that there is no better training for a historian or a biographer than a six-month stint on a documentary project. Biographers would do well to learn from editors to take greater care with their projects and to read their primary sources more closely. And they should definitely take advantage of the modern documentary editions that are available to them.