

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association  
for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)

Documentary Editing, Association for

---


Fall 2003

## The Canons of Selection

John Y. Simon

*Southern Illinois University Carbondale*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit>

 Part of the [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), and the [Technical and Professional Writing Commons](#)

---

Simon, John Y., "The Canons of Selection" (2003). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. 367.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit/367>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Documentary Editing, Association for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

# The Canons of Selection

John Y. Simon

By signing a bill on 30 November 1983, reauthorizing the grants program of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, President Reagan ended a crisis in American historical editing. When the Commission had found itself without authorization or budget recommendation in early 1981, its sponsored projects faced extinction. Thanks to a model advocacy effort spearheaded by the Association for Documentary Editing, Congress funded the program anyway, while editors desperately sought alternative funding. Despite fundraising and lobbying efforts, documentary projects established between 1950 and 1970 reached new levels of productivity. Once the funding crisis abated, signs pointed toward years of peace and prosperity in the editing factories.

Editors were somewhat surprised, therefore, a half year after this time of troubles ended, to read a feature article in the *New York Times* headlined "Publishing of Historical Papers Declines," an article all the more disturbing because thoughtfully prepared.<sup>1</sup> Reporter Colin Campbell asserted that comprehensive editions had been "forced into retreat." He offered as evidence the "retrenchment" of the number of volumes planned for the editions of Andrew Jackson, Daniel Webster, Robert Morris, and Jefferson Davis. Explanations offered for this trend included the cost of comprehensive editions, lengthy preparation time, declining sales, impatience of younger editors to "move on to more prestigious work," the alternative of microfilm, and the effects of computer technology.

Referring to the truncation of the Jefferson Davis edition, the article quoted Henry Steele Commager as commenting, "There's something to be said for that." Frank Burke, executive director of the NHPRC, followed by asserting, "There's more and more going for the significant years of the person rather than the cradle-to-grave approach." Burke had been trying to "urge, cajole and persuade" editors to achieve the goal of "leaner and tighter" editions with "fewer documents and less annotation."

Although the article touched on many issues of concern to historical editors, I propose to focus on the scope of documentary editions and to explore the issue

<sup>1</sup> *New York Times* (Chicago edition), 11 June 1984, p. 20.

of selection of documents for printing, hoping to discover whether this can be analyzed as more than a struggle between editors and government officials eager to distribute federal funds more broadly.

In 1979, Arthur S. Link called attention to the “remarkable fact that we do not seem to enjoy a consensus in our profession concerning general principles or guidelines of selection that can be applied and used in all fields of documentary editing.”<sup>2</sup> At the same time, he expressed confidence that “a group of reasonable people could at least lay down the guidelines and principles,” especially since they could propose “alternative methodologies.”<sup>3</sup> Link’s comments appeared in the *Newsletter of the Association for Documentary Editing* along with an article by Barbara Oberg concerning decisions on selection and annotation that accepted a premise that selection was interpretive and that “the imaginative direction of the edition . . . makes it worth doing. The mere inclusion of all letters which have been found does not guarantee a good documentary edition. If there is no selectivity, if there is no creative scholarly center to the edition, the documentary edition produced will not make a significant contribution to historical literature. Selectivity can become a strength.”<sup>4</sup> Although the views of Link and Oberg were not completely contradictory, one implied the possibility of establishing objective guidelines and principles, the other implied that they must necessarily remain subjective. Both remarked that editors had written little on the subject of selection; neither mentioned one who had tried to do so.

An older colleague once told me that as a young graduate student he had been taken to a historical convention by his adviser. Gesturing across a crowded room, the adviser had said: “See that old man over there—the one who is so drunk and making such a fool of himself? Well, that’s Clarence Carter, and he’s going to be remembered when the rest of us are forgotten.” Another witness, Nathan Reingold, remembers Carter as “a striking man given, even in his early 70s, to pinching waitresses, which impressed me greatly.”<sup>5</sup> Memories of Carter’s raffish behavior and earthy language may outlast consideration of his efforts to establish editorial principles.

Born in Jacksonville, Illinois, in 1881, Carter received his doctorate at the University of Illinois with a dissertation on *Great Britain and the Illinois Country, 1763–1774*, which won the Justin Winsor Prize in American History for 1908 and

<sup>2</sup>Arthur S. Link, “Where We Stand Now and Where We Might Go,” *Newsletter of the Association for Documentary Editing* 2 (February 1980): 2.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>4</sup>Barbara Oberg, “Selection and Annotation: Deciding Alone,” *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>5</sup>Nathan Reingold, “Reflections of an Unrepentant Editor,” *American Archivist* 46 (Winter 1983): 17.

carried Carter to an appointment at Miami University. His long editing career began when he joined Clarence W. Alvord in preparing three fat volumes of documents covering Illinois from 1763 to 1769 (published in 1915, 1916, and 1921) and continued with two volumes of *The Correspondence of General Thomas Gage*, published in 1931 and 1933. Appointed editor of the *Territorial Papers of the United States* in 1931, he produced twenty-five volumes before his death in 1961.<sup>6</sup> Two additional volumes—planned by Carter, edited by John Porter Bloom—appeared later, but in some respects the series seems to have died with Carter.

In 1952 the National Archives published Carter's *Historical Editing*, a forty-six-page pamphlet in which the longest section is "Canons of Selection." Carter began by discussing "four alternative editorial plans," the first illustrated by Julian Boyd's principles for Thomas Jefferson, a comprehensive plan to print "everything legitimately Jeffersonian." The second plan was to print comprehensively a series of letters selected from a larger body, as Carter himself did by choosing to limit his *Gage Correspondence* to exchanges between Gage and certain major British officials. The third involved comprehensive coverage of narrowly defined topics or periods, again illustrated by Carter's own work, this time with the documents on British rule in Illinois printed in the *Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library*. Fourth, and last, he came to cases where true selection was necessary. Even while ostensibly discussing the issue of selection, he had first surveyed every strategy for maintaining a comprehensive approach in the face of massive documentation.

Finally confronting the problem directly, Carter discussed standards of selection under six headings; the first was fiscal limitations. In admonishing editors to consider time and money in planning and editing, he failed to establish a standard but certainly discussed the key element in the selection process. His other criteria included elimination of documents previously edited and published in acceptable form, documents judged trivial, routine documents (after a few were retained as illustrative and others were cited), and documents judged duplicative. In the last case, Carter advocated printing "the one which contains the fullest story,"<sup>7</sup> though this hardly satisfied the rules of evidence. Presumably he had in mind administrative correspondence characterized by bureaucratic redundancy

<sup>6</sup>Solon J. Buck, "Clarence E. Carter, 1881–1961," *American Archivist* 25 (January 1962): 59–60; Philip D. Jordan, "Clarence E. Carter, A Tribute," *Prologue* 1 (Winter 1969): 46–47; Harold D. Ryan, "Clarence E. Carter, A Memoir," *ibid.*, 48–50; John Porter Bloom, "Clarence Edwin Carter," in Howard R. Lamar, *The Reader's Encyclopedia of the American West* (New York, 1977), 166.

<sup>7</sup>Clarence E. Carter, *Historical Editing*, *Bulletins of the National Archives*, no. 7 (August 1952), 15.

rather than narrative reports of controversial incidents.

Carter established five standards in one brief paragraph each, then devoted four pages to a discussion of the standard that he called "priority." Assuming that after applying all other standards the remaining material would exceed the budget—even though the first was fiscal limitation—the wise editor, argued Carter, would apply a final standard to eliminate chance and "bind the various types of documents into a cohesive whole."<sup>8</sup> To illustrate this standard, he drew on his own experience with the *Territorial Papers*, for which he had found a central theme in administration. The chief area of exclusion related to Indian affairs, an exclusion justified by arguments that pesky redskins ignored territorial boundaries, would have remained a problem if no territories existed, and provoked documents too numerous to print within the limitations of the *Territorial Papers*.

In 1969 one of Carter's old friends, speaking at a commemorative conference, reported that he had asked graduate students in U.S. history at three schools about the *Territorial Papers*: "less than one percent had even heard of the papers and . . . not a single student had consulted them."<sup>9</sup> To what extent Carter's inclusion of all pertinent documents from the extant letterbooks of the postmaster general at the expense of documents pertaining to Indian affairs contributed to this neglect remains conjectural; no argument based upon the ignorance of graduate students has reasonable controls. In establishing his priority in editing the *Territorial Papers*, Carter reflected the orientation of a generation dominated by the ideas of Frederick Jackson Turner, but historical concerns shift.

Carter's selection standards have attracted few followers. He codified the obvious: that editors should work within constraints of time and money, and they should exclude documents lacking significance. He tied the standard of priority so closely to his special problems with the *Territorial Papers* that it has little general application, and its use by Carter himself attracted criticism.

The question arises whether Carter's problem originated in the very need for selection. Are general standards of selection possible? Whatever our doubts, perhaps we ought to try a few.

1. Selection of documents is at best a necessary evil. While an editor may eagerly reject previously printed documents, and those trivial, routine, and annoyingly—rather than enlighteningly—duplicative, a large number of documents still cry out for inclusion. If the editor does not heed these cries, nobody else will. By nature the historical editor is a preserver rather than a destroyer of

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Jordan, "Carter," 47.

documents, and documents relegated to mere citation or a microform supplement do not receive equal attention from future researchers. The editor prints as many documents as possible, while appealing for resources to print more.

2. Editors forced to select still struggle to achieve a degree of comprehensive coverage. For example, the editors of Woodrow Wilson, confronted with mountains of documents hearing on his presidency, still promise “a comprehensive edition of the papers and records of the presidential period that emanated directly or indirectly from Wilson and shed significant light on his thoughts, purposes and activities.” To reach this goal, the editors enumerate twelve categories of inclusion, beginning with “All letters by Wilson that are essential to understanding his private life and personality. . . . All of Wilson’s political correspondence that seems to us to have enduring historical value. . . . Enough of Wilson’s correspondence to make clear his concern about patronage. . . .”<sup>10</sup>

Another example of comprehensive coverage deserves consideration, especially as it applies to documents created before the twentieth century. In *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, the editors determined to print everything written by Lincoln except his copies of documents composed by others, everything pertaining to his legal work (reserved for separate publication later), and certain categories of enumerated documents.

The following have not been included unless particular significance of content or circumstances seems to demand their presences: acts of congress, treaties, commissions, authorizations, appointments, pardons, land grants, checks, ships’ papers, certificates of service, credences, discharge papers, military orders (except those personally drafted or primarily Lincoln’s), draft orders, routine letters and endorsements of transmittal, routine pardon and clemency endorsements (such as “Let this man take the oath of December 8, 1863, and be discharged”) approvals, letters written and signed by his secretaries, form replies to requests for an autograph, and nominations to office submitted to the United States Senate. Concerning the last category, nominations, it was decided that such routine and repetitive communications should be excluded on two grounds: first, that they are in print in the *Executive Journal* of the United States Senate, and second, that they would swell the proportions and cost of the *Collected Works* by an additional volume. With the exception of nominations, land grants, discharge papers, ships’ papers, routine pardon and clemency endorsements, draft orders, approvals, appointments, authorizations, and commissions, however, an effort has been made to list in

<sup>10</sup>Arthur S. Link et al., eds., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton, 1966–), 27: xiv.

Appendix II all known documents which have not been included.<sup>11</sup>

Within these guidelines, available Lincoln documents were printed in full in eight volumes. Letters addressed to Lincoln were used—sometimes in full, more often in extract—for annotation, and those not pertinent to annotation were omitted.

Under increasing pressure of time and money, editors may well ask whether the Boyd model of equal treatment for incoming correspondence is desirable, especially if confronted with a choice between watered-down Boyd and full-dress Basler. The plan devised by the editors of Benjamin Franklin to cope with voluminous incoming French correspondence represents a compromise between the two strategies.<sup>12</sup> Others might profitably consider whether second-class treatment of incoming correspondence, even if violating editorial instincts, might be a realistic price for comprehensive coverage of one person's writings.

3. Selection standards employed should be set forth as explicitly as possible. Among editors dealing with twentieth-century figures generating mountains of paper, forced to select a fraction even for comprehensive coverage, the Wilson editors are the most explicit about guidelines, though their detailed explanation does not attempt to conceal the extent of editorial judgment involved.

4. Selection should not be tendentious. An editor can anticipate that documents selected will most often be used by unlikely persons for unforeseen purposes. If the papers of Henry Laurens or Philip Mazzei, for example, were edited only for the benefit of their future biographers, even the audience over the centuries might be minuscule and hardly worth the effort. *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* have rarely been combed by Grant biographers; other researchers want information on battles, regiments, officers, black troops, and even the dredges employed at Vicksburg. Some uses could not have been reasonably predicted; future research topics defy present imagination. Rigorous selection involves a realistic prediction of the audience, and one wonders about the goal of presenting “the essential [Daniel] Webster” to “the less dedicated scholar and the general reader,” when reviewers noted that 20 of the 26 letters selected from the 121 that Webster wrote in 1818 had been previously printed in full or in part, and that some 200 of the approximately 400 in the first volume had already appeared in earlier editions of Webster.<sup>13</sup> When an audience cannot be predicted, it can at least be respected.

<sup>11</sup>Roy P. Basler et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1953–55), 1: ix.

<sup>12</sup>Leonard W. Labaree et al., eds., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven, 1959–), 23: xlvi–xlvi.

<sup>13</sup>Charles M. Wiltse and Harold Moser, eds., *The Papers of Daniel Webster* (Hanover, N.H., 1974–), 1:xiv; W. Edwin Hemphill review in *American Archivist* 38 (October 1975): 558; Charles T. Cullen review in *New England Quarterly* 50 (June 1977): 351.

5. Documents are more important than apparatus. Faced with problems of space, Clarence Carter reduced or, as he put it, “attacked” the annotation to make room for more documents. Each volume of the *Territorial Papers* introducing a new territory had only a brief, businesslike introduction, largely devoted to the selection canons; as the series progressed, notes diminished in frequency and length, as did cross-references. Carter viewed printed documents and detailed indexes as the heart of the enterprise; anything else could be jettisoned for economy.

6. Selection standards once established should be maintained to protect the integrity of the edition. Editors collectively, as well as individually, ought to resist efforts to “urge, cajole and persuade” them to adopt new standards for work in progress. On the other hand, new standards of selection for Woodrow Wilson when he entered the White House are appropriate, since the nature of the documents changed rather than the priorities of the editors. Indeed, editors should try to avoid being trapped by method and acknowledge a greater responsibility to the documents than to their own procedures.

7. Editors serve the best interest of scholarship by decisions to include documents. David Donald complained that volume six of Henry Clay, covering the year 1827 in 1,448 pages was “not merely unwieldy but very expensive.”<sup>14</sup> Who wields volume six of Clay—presumably by trying to read it in bed? Editors, especially those who double as reviewers, should understand that the effort of a conscientious reviewer, who attempts to read every word of a volume of a documentary edition, hardly provides proper perspective on the use and value of any book intended as a reference source. Editors who attempt to meet the needs of specialized scholars and general readers in the same volume usually attempt the impossible. Ultimately, editors must fall back upon their own sense of significance in determining what to print. Recognizing that this is a creative and subjective judgment does not lessen the obligation to provide the fullest documentation with the available resources.

No evidence exists that highly selective editions will prove more cost effective than more comprehensive editions. Selection that means more than printing those documents most readily available involves the same costly research strategy, especially when guaranteed by demands for accompanying “comprehensive” microform.

In concluding his discussion of plans for the Adams Papers, plans unusually vague as to number of volumes and canons of selection, Lyman Butterfield stated

<sup>14</sup>David Herbert Donald, “*The Papers of Henry Clay: A Review Essay*,” *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 82 (Winter 1984): 72.



that he “had not choice but to plan it in as nearly ideal terms as possible, and to execute that part of it he is privileged to execute without regard to immediate limitations of time and funds. To have done less would have been to add another to the long series of editions of statesmen’s papers that are monuments to inadequate planning, duplicative effort, and little faith.”<sup>15</sup>

Butterfield’s point is illustrated by *The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee*, published in 1961. The volume begins with Lee’s letter of resignation from the U.S. Army and concludes with his reports of the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia. Of approximately six thousand wartime letters available to the editors, about one thousand were selected for printing with virtually no annotation but some brief connecting narrative.<sup>16</sup> Since the editors selected major letters, most had been previously printed. Ultimately the *Wartime Papers* represented little advance in Lee scholarship but blocked further editorial work for a least a generation.

It should be remembered that Julian Boyd was not the first to edit Thomas Jefferson, that most major NHPRC editions seek to supplant faulty or incomplete editions of important persons or subjects. These editions depend on federal funds as a vital element in securing additional funding necessary to completion. In appealing for funds to establish the grant program, the Commission invoked the values of comprehensive inclusion.

A further significant point to be considered is that the scholarship and the funds invested in these modern editorial projects are destined to be more permanent and lasting in their influence than biographical or monographic writing. This is largely due to the sounder canons of modern editorial practice and to the comprehensive scope of these projects. Documents are not chosen to represent the man as the editor wishes to present him. They are not chosen to emphasize a particular interest in history that may be the editor’s or that of his age. They include social, economic, scientific, and cultural aspects of everyday living in the past that to earlier editors seemed too ordinary to have significance, but that to a changed world are often pregnant with meaning. These editions will endure because they are above suspicion of partisanship and because in their inclusiveness they anticipate the changing interests of future historians.<sup>17</sup>

Twenty years later such promises may appear pretentious, or overly optimistic;

<sup>15</sup>L. H. Butterfield et al., eds., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), 1:xli.

<sup>16</sup>Clifford Dowdey and Louis H. Manarin, eds., *The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee* (Boston and Toronto, 1961), [ix].

<sup>17</sup>*A Report to the President Containing A Proposal by the National Historical Publications Commission . . .* (Washington, 1963), 23.

to a considerable extent, however, editors have managed to meet these goals. Similar promises made in the campaign for continuing federal support also supply an essential element in appeals for foundation and institutional funding. Pressure for selection beyond that dictated by the goals of editors and the nature of documents throws into question the rationale for the entire enterprise.

