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“The Most Important Scholarly Work”: Reflections on Twenty Years of Change in Historical Editing

Michael E. Stevens

Twenty years ago, at the first annual meeting of the Association for Documentary Editing in Princeton, New Jersey, Arthur Link stated that documentary editing is “the most important scholarly work being done in the United States, and, if well done, it will be the most enduring.”¹ Last year, the distinguished historian Edmund S. Morgan echoed Link when he wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that the 154 volumes produced by the Founding Fathers editions “stand as the single most important achievement of American historical scholarship in this century.”²

Despite this high praise, Link’s and Morgan’s opinions are not universally held. The 14 August 1998 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* carried a story on Ira Berlin, founder of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project, that noted “Mr. Berlin is widely respected, but documentary editing doesn’t have quite the cachet of traditional research.”³ Gore Vidal, in the 20 April 1998 issue of *The Nation*, harshly questioned C. Vann Woodward’s Pulitzer Prize for his edition of Mary Chesnut’s diary as being inappropriate since the edition “is hardly history writing.”⁴ Thus, twenty years after the founding of the ADE, there still remains a diversity of opinion about the value and importance of documentary editing. These varying evaluations call for an assessment of the changes in historical editing during the past two decades. I intend to look back on change in three areas of our work: documentary editing as a craft, as a profession, and as a legacy for the future.

During the past twenty years, we have seen a steady but distinct evolution in

¹Arthur S. Link, “Where We Stand Now and Where We Might Go,” *Newsletter of the Association for Documentary Editing* 2, no. 1 (February 1980): 1.

²Edmund S. Morgan, “Honor Thy Founding Fathers,” *Wall Street Journal*, 23 April 1997.

³Karen J. Winkler, “A Historian’s Sweeping Projects Seek to Change Our Understanding of Slavery,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 14 August 1998, p. A13.

⁴[Gore Vidal] “Bad History,” *The Nation*, 20 April 1998, p. 11.

how we practice our craft. The method of transcription used by historical editors has sparked substantial debate during this era. “The Short Happy Thesis of G. Thomas Tanselle,”⁵ as Don Cook called it, generated vigorous discussions at the first two annual meetings in Princeton and Williamsburg. Tanselle’s criticism of historical editions concerned their failure, in his view, to present the texts of manuscripts absolutely literally and deficiencies in how fully they spelled out their methodology. Twenty years later, one can declare a modified victory for the Tanselleans. Although many editions still follow the same editorial practices as they did in 1978, a goodly number of others, such as *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, and *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, have changed their editorial policy to a much more literal style than they employed in the pre-Tanselle era. Projects created after 1978 also tend to follow a more literal style than editions begun prior to that date. Still, editors have not blindly followed Tanselle’s strictures but have found a middle ground, balancing concerns about readability with a greater sensitivity to the perils of making changes to the text. Probably far more important, historical editors have become more systematic in stating their editorial policies.

Likewise, there has been an evolution in the practice of annotation and selection in the past two decades. Fueled by concerns of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and the National Endowment for the Humanities over the productivity of the editions, annotation has become leaner, and the expansive notes that graced the final volumes of the *Papers of Thomas Jefferson* prepared by Julian Boyd have disappeared. For better or for worse, annotation tends to be more straightforward. The criteria for the selection of documents to be included in editions have become tighter. The era of creating comprehensive editions was ending in 1978; today, it is almost unthinkable that a new edition would strive to be comprehensive. While we have seen these changes in our craft, the fundamental underpinnings—the need for reliable texts and a concern for what they reveal about the past—remain the anchor of our work.

Just as our craft has changed since 1978, so has our profession and the opportunities that it offers those who enter it. Fifteen years ago, Charles Cullen described the documentary editors of the late ‘70s, and early, ‘80s as the “soft

⁵Don L. Cook, “The Short Happy Thesis of G. Thomas Tanselle,” *Newsletter of the Association for Documentary Editing* 3, no. 1 (February 1981): 1–14. The original essay can be found in G. Thomas Tanselle, “The Editing of Historical Documents,” *Studies in Bibliography* 31 (1978): 1–56.

money generation.”⁶ Today, nearly a generation later, “the soft money generation” is being replaced by the “no money generation.” Cullen was describing the transition from the professor/editor or part-time editor to the full-time editor. During those years professor/editors such as Merrill Jensen and Linda Grant De Pauw passed the torch to younger editors such as John Kaminski and Charlene Bickford, individuals whose entire careers had been spent in documentary editing.

Today, new editors entering the profession often do so as a temporary or transitional part of their careers, and there are fewer of them. This phenomenon stems from the reduction in real dollars that support the work of documentary editors and the decline of university assistance in the form of released time for their professor/editors. One sees this trend also in the profile of interns at the NHPRC Institute for the Editing of Historical Documents. Two decades ago, at least half the interns at Camp Edit were working on long-term NHPRC-supported projects. In recent years, the number of Commission-supported staffers has been reduced to about 25 percent, with the remainder being individual scholars who work on editions while practicing some other profession, be it archivist, librarian, or lawyer.

The pattern becomes equally evident when one compares the funding of new projects in the last two decades. During the three years, 1976–1978, leading up to the formation of the ADE, the NHPRC issued first-time grants to twenty-nine different projects, including *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation; The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*; and *The Documentary History of the Supreme Court of the United States*. Compare this to the last three years, when the Commission provided first-time funding to a total of two new projects: *The Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott* and *The Robert A. Taft Papers*. There are many good reasons for this funding pattern, most notably that the commitment to ongoing projects continues while the Commission’s budget has remained static. Nonetheless, the result is a change in the environment of our profession. Fewer new young scholars are taking up documentary editing as a career, and there is a reluctance to begin the great, long-term projects that can be so important.

Finally, how has our work as a legacy for the future changed in the last twenty years? Editors receive varying recognition for their work, as I indicated in the quotations that opened my remarks. Documentary editors, in general, may be

⁶Charles T. Cullen, “Some Reflections on the Soft Money Generation,” *Newsletter of the Association for Documentary Editing* 5, no. 4 (December 1983): 1–4.

less likely to be concerned with status issues than other history professionals. Perhaps this is because they have devoted their careers to making accessible the words of others. Or perhaps it is because they work collectively instead of individually in their publications. Nonetheless, many documentary editors express concern about the loss of the infrastructure that supports their ability to leave a legacy.

It is almost a cliché to compare the preparation of the great historical editions to the building of cathedrals in medieval Europe: both took generations to create and both are meant to be lasting works. But the metaphor also can be applied in another often overlooked way that also leaves a legacy. If we think about the stonemasons, woodcarvers, and architects who built the cathedrals, their work could continue only if they passed on their skills and insights to a new generation. The last twenty years have been remarkably successful not only for the body of published work that has been created but equally so in the legacy that is being developed in terms of passing on our craft. In the long history of documentary editing in this nation, which dates back to Ebenezer Hazard's work in the eighteenth century, there never have been more effective efforts to establish systems to pass on professional standards.

The first and most notable accomplishment is the very survival and existence of this association. The ADE has provided a forum for editors to share their expertise, to assist each other, and to advocate for their common goals. Through its annual meeting, its advocacy efforts, and the way it facilitates exchange between members, the ADE has provided a means for editors to learn and refine their craft and to pass it on to novice editors. When I attended my first ADE meeting in Princeton in 1979, I was struck by how welcomed I felt as a fledgling editor compared to my sense of anonymity at my first meeting of the Organization of American Historians the previous year.

The contribution of four publications sponsored or endorsed by the ADE has been equally important. *Documentary Editing*, the ADE's quarterly publication, has made a major contribution to passing on our craft. The early issues of its predecessor, the *ADE Newsletter*, lamented the lack of a venue for solid reviews of editions. *Documentary Editing* has met that need and would have been a success if that alone were what it accomplished; but it provides much more, building a body of literature that is conveniently gathered for future editors. For that we can thank the ADE's directors of publications in general and the editors of our journal, specifically Robert Rutland, Jon Kukla, Kathleen Waldenfels Dorman, Joel Myerson, Sharon Ritenour Stevens, Tom Mason, Jim Taylor, and most recently Beth Luey.

Then, too, there has been the development of standards and teaching tools to ensure the quality of future editions and to guide new editors. The publication of Mary-Jo Kline's *Guide to Documentary Editing* in 1987 was a direct outgrowth of the founding of the ADE and of Arthur Link's presidential address at the first annual meeting. The *Guide's* publication marked the first time that editors could find in a single, convenient place advice on historical and literary documentary editing. This was followed three years later by Beth Luey's annotated bibliography, *Editing Documents and Texts*. This work directed readers to a substantial and growing body of literature on our profession. Today, we have an updated edition of the Kline *Guide* in a softcover edition suitable for classroom use as well as Steven Burg's and my own *Editing Historical Documents: A Handbook of Practice*.⁷

We have also seen a passing on of legacy through hands-on training for those interested in documentary editing. The NHPRC fellowship in documentary editing ensures that new scholars obtain experience, and many of these fellows have gone on to head projects. Two of them, David Chesnutt and Charles Cullen, are past presidents of this organization. Regrettably, funding for the fellowship has been seriously diminished. Since 1995 only one is awarded annually compared to the three or four from earlier years.

Training sessions in South Carolina on publishing electronic editions and workshops for local history advocates in Arizona and Wisconsin offer needed education for both experienced editors and amateurs. The training of documentary editors also continues through the annual editing institute. After several warm summers in Virginia and South Carolina, Camp Edit found a congenial home in 1978 in Madison, Wisconsin, where it was ably led the first year by George Vogt and for seventeen years by Dick Sheldon. Since 1996 I have been privileged to direct the Institute and to watch the legacy continue.

Thus we have seen change over the last two decades in historical documentary editing in terms of craft, profession, and legacy. But what challenges face documentary editing over the next twenty years that call for action on the part of the ADE and its members?

First, the absence of plans to fund new projects is disconcerting. In the next ten to fifteen years a number of the long-term projects will be completed. At this point, the ADE and the NHPRC still have time to think about systematic efforts,

⁷Mary-Jo Kline, *A Guide to Documentary Editing* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987; 2d edition, 1998); Beth Luey, *Editing Documents and Text: An Annotated Bibliography* (Madison, WI.: Madison House, 1990); Michael E. Stevens and Steven B. Burg, *Editing Historical Documents: A Handbook of Practice* (Walnut Creek, CA.: AltaMira Press, 1997).

similar to those undertaken by the Commission in the 1950s, to develop lists of the major editions that can be undertaken in the future when the long-term projects complete their work. The ADE should take the lead in reexamining those lists and revise or expand upon them.

Second, providing school audiences at all levels with primary materials is an opportunity; its neglect is a danger. Some editions have worked hard to develop classroom-friendly materials, but today most of the documentary material being prepared for school audiences is being done without the participation of ADE members, nor is it driven by the standards developed by this profession. ADE members need not prepare such materials; rather, the Association needs to embrace those in the historical or educational fields who prepare texts for the classroom and find a way to ensure that its programs and services also meet the needs of educators. Editors and teachers can create partnerships to make documents more accessible in the classroom. Perhaps the ADE Education Committee should shift its focus from the teaching of documentary editing at the college level to this pressing issue.

Third, the World Wide Web offers exciting opportunities and dangerous threats. Today, more than ever, historical documents are easily accessible via the Internet. For example, the “Documenting the American South” site maintained by the University of North Carolina Libraries offers searchable texts of first-person printed narratives related to Southern history, printed African-American slave narratives, and selections of Southern literature. The “Making of America” project at the University of Michigan and Cornell University provides more than four thousand volumes of social history from the antebellum period through Reconstruction.⁸ There is also an amazing number of unreliable texts on the Internet, and users have few ways of distinguishing between the reliable and the unreliable. Given the anarchic nature of the Internet, unreliable texts probably will continue to be available online for some time. Is it not ironic that as the new media make documentary works so much more available, their reliability becomes increasingly questionable? At this stage, documentary editors and the ADE should take an active lead in setting standards for documentary material published on the Web. Internet users need to know that they are getting reliable editions. This might begin, for instance, with a series of awards or seals of approval offered by the Association to web sites that meet certain standards and

⁸The “Documenting the American South” site is located at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/>. The “Making of America” sites are at <http://www.hti.umich.edu/m/moagrp/> (Michigan) and at <http://moa.cit.cornell.edu/moa/> (Cornell).

then publicizing this seal to the educational community.

Finally, the promise of digital television suggests that we may have to develop new ways to think about how we will present documents. The State Historical Society of Wisconsin and Wisconsin Public Television are exploring ways in which the Society can present documents that are linked to historical television programming. In the future, a person watching a historical television documentary will be able to click on a menu, halt the digital stream, and read a letter, diary, or memoir that was cited in the program. To a limited extent, we are already seeing this take place in the nondigital environment. A number of PBS history shows already include the texts of documents on their websites. The Association needs to examine ways to become involved with this exciting new development.⁹

Twenty years after the creation of the ADE, we can be proud of its accomplishments and the evolution of our work as craft, profession, and legacy. There have been many changes and accomplishments during the last two decades—too many to address in detail. Experiments in electronic publication, the Model Editions Partnership, the Founding Fathers CD-ROM project, the Library of America series, and the Historical Documents study all were important milestones. We have seen more women serving as project directors and greater interest in editions related to new areas of historical research. We have also discovered that the scholarly editions have friends and supporters in Congress. As we look back on the accomplishments of the last two decades, we are faced with the challenge to maintain our relevance. If the past two decades are any indication, I am confident that with sufficient planning, strength of will, and hard work, the next twenty years can be equally as vital.

⁹For example, see the Frontline program *From Jesus to Christ*, which has a web site with documents at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/>.

