

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

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

Documentary Editing, Association for

---

12-2002

## Scholarly Editions and the National Endowment for the Humanities

Bruce Cole

*National Endowment for the Humanities*, bcole@eppc.org

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](#)

---

Cole, Bruce, "Scholarly Editions and the National Endowment for the Humanities" (2002). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. 410.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit/410>

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.

# Scholarly Editions and the National Endowment for the Humanities

Bruce Cole

Good morning. It's a pleasure to be here. I am an admirer and grateful user of a number of documentary editions produced by people in this room. On a small scale, as an editor of a scholarly edition of Ridolfi's *The Life of Titian*, I experienced the rigors and rewards of your special kind of academic labor. The work is painstaking, repetitive, sometimes tedious. For many editions, scholars must invest decades in close reading, collaborative research, and careful transcription.

But your work has permanence and resonance. It is significant that some scholarly editions are published on paper meant to last 500 years. For posterity, you record and contextualize history's most important correspondence, influential speeches, and revealing asides. What you do is a form of scholarship that is particularly allied with the core mission of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Our mission is simply this: "Because democracy demands wisdom, the NEH serves and strengthens our Republic by promoting excellence in the humanities and conveying the lessons of history to all Americans." You give generations to come the tools to understand history and discover its lessons anew.

Today I wanted to take a few minutes to discuss with you some of the ways we can work together in the realms of furthering scholarship, safeguarding academic standards, and addressing the challenge of American amnesia.

## Scholarship

There are many ways we can—and have already—worked together in the area of scholarship. Because your work is so important, and because it is too often unrewarded, the NEH must—and will—make a robust investment in documentary scholarship.

Bruce Cole, Chairman of the National Endowment of the Humanities, has written fourteen books, many of them about the Renaissance. They include *The Renaissance Artist at Work*; *Sienese Painting in the Age of the Renaissance: Italian Art, 1250–1550*; *The Relation of Art to Life and Society*; *Titian and Venetian Art, 1450–1590*; and *Art of the Western World: From Ancient Greece to Post-Modernism*. His most recent books is *The Informed Eye: Understanding Masterpieces of Western Art*.

In the past year, we have reaffirmed our commitment to documentary work by creating a separate funding category for scholarly editions. Many of you here today have submitted applications under these new guidelines. In the past you've worked with now-legendary NEH staff members like Margot Backas. Now, talented officers such as Michael Hall, Doug Arnold, and Kathy Toavs are shepherding applicants and projects, and I am thankful that the learned Jim Herbert is at the helm of the Research Division.

The Petra Papyrus Project has rescued knowledge from fragments of carbonized scrolls found buried in an ancient ruin. The Dead Sea Scrolls Project is bringing scholarly light to bear on those mysterious documents. The papers of George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson give us a window into the minds of the founders. The Ratification of the Constitution Papers Project has apparently been fielding calls from Supreme Court justices who are trying to discern the original intent of the Constitution. We are learning more about the life and ideas of Frederick Douglass through his published papers. The Freedmen and Southern Society Project is documenting the experiences of the first generation of former slaves from the Civil War to Reconstruction. The Thomas Edison Papers are, appropriately enough, experimenting with novel forms of digital dissemination. The Dwight D. Eisenhower Papers, now nearing completion, have impacted scholarship in surprising ways.

I'm proud of NEH's long involvement in scholarly editions. Some of our earliest grants were in support of documentary work, and I am glad that today so many of you in this room have been working with the NEH.

We want to support your ongoing work. And, we want to work with you to find ways to help the current generation of projects move closer to completion. We also want to ensure that there is greater dissemination of hundreds of volumes of previously published editions. I am particularly interested in finding ways to accelerate the on-line availability of editions, and I welcome your ideas and input in making that goal a reality.

## **Excellence and Integrity**

I also believe we can, and must, work together to ensure the strength and force of scholarly standards. Documentary editions are intellectual monuments. They are usually done only once. Therefore, they must reach the highest standards of excellence and integrity. If the transcriptions are sloppy or if the research is shoddy, the consequences are vast and long-term. A poorly-executed scholarly edition is like a foundation built on quicksand—every work that stands on it is imperiled.

In recent years, the historical profession has been plagued by a series of ethical lapses. Some of our most distinguished public historians have been found out as serial plagiarists. Another much-praised scholar has just resigned from his university over accusations of academic fraud. Those who teach, publish, and produce should be held to a higher, not a lower, standard. Universities, scholarly societies, independent research institutions, and indeed the NEH, must vigorously, fairly, and scrupulously investigate and adjudicate scholarly misconduct wherever it occurs. To fail to do so is a mistake and a disaster.

In such an environment, it is alarming that so many publishers, reviewers, and other members of the academic community have been abdicating their responsibility to help ensure accurate and honest scholarship. Because others have shirked their responsibilities, the role of the editor as the guardian of integrity and quality has become all the more important and necessary. When others take shortcuts, or suspend judgment indefinitely, or disclaim all responsibility, you will have our support when you do the right thing.

Humanities scholarship is influential only to the extent that it is credible. The power of scholarly findings rests on the foundation of trust and truth. When a link in the chain of scholarship is broken by deceit or fraud, more is lost than the deceiver's reputation. The scholarly community cannot tolerate plagiarism, fraud, or other forms of misconduct without destroying the trust on which it relies.

The academy, guilds, and indeed, all scholarly associations must be places of open and free discourse, havens where divergent and even disagreeable positions are freely spoken, and where debate should be free of intolerance and dogmatism. But in our aversion to rigid judgmentalism, we cannot abandon making judgments.

You are the gatekeepers and the standard bearers.

## **We the People**

As such, I want to enlist your help in what I consider one of the great challenges facing our country: the threat of American amnesia.

As you know, one of the common threads of great civilizations is the cultivation of memory. Many of the great works of antiquity are transcribed from oral traditions. From Homer to the Beowulf epic, such tales trained people to remember their heritage and history through story and song, and passed those stories and songs throughout generations. Indeed, your livelihood is predicated on the understanding that our lives are enriched—with meaning, clarity, and purpose—by understanding the past.

We are in danger of forgetting this lesson. For years, even decades, polls, tests, and studies have shown that Americans do not know their history, and cannot remember even the most significant events of the twentieth century. Of course, we are a forward-looking people. We are more concerned with what happens tomorrow than what happened yesterday. But we are in danger of having our view of the future obscured by our ignorance of the past. We cannot see clearly ahead if we are blind to history. Unfortunately, most indicators point to a worsening of our case of American amnesia.

I'll give just a few examples. One study of students at 55 elite universities found that over a third were unable to identify the Constitution as establishing the division of powers in our government, only 29 percent could identify the term "Reconstruction," and 40 percent could not place the Civil War in the correct half-century. The recent National Assessment of Education Progress test found that over half of high school seniors couldn't say whom we fought in World War II. Perhaps even more horrifying, 18 percent thought that Germany was a U.S. ally in the Second World War.

Such collective amnesia is dangerous. Today, it is all the more urgent that we study American institutions, culture, and history. Unlike a monarchy or dictatorship, democracy is not self-perpetuating. Its continued flourishing requires a transmission of knowledge of, and a love for, the rule of law, the rigors of justice, and the rights of our citizens. That knowledge and love must be transmitted from and renewed in each generation. Citizens kept ignorant of their history are robbed of the riches of their heritage, and handicapped in their ability to understand and appreciate other cultures.

If Americans cannot recall whom we fought, and whom we fought alongside, during World War II, it should not be assumed that they will long remember what happened here

on September 11. And a nation that does not know why it exists, or what it stands for, cannot long be expected to flourish. We at the NEH want to meet this challenge, and we hope to recruit and enlist allies in the cause.

We are launching a new initiative, with the support and leadership of the White House, to bolster the study and understanding of American history. On September 17, Constitution Day, President Bush announced his history and civics initiative in a Rose Garden Ceremony. At the center of the White House effort is the National Endowment for the Humanities' new initiative called "We the People." It is the first time in the NEH's almost 40-year history that we have been the focus of a presidential Rose Garden announcement. I believe this demonstrates our President's exceptional concern for the problem of American historical amnesia, and commitment to its cure.

The "We the People" initiative includes the following three elements:

1. Building knowledge: "We the People" will start with a large-scale solicitation of grant applications that aim to enhance the teaching, study, and understanding of American history. NEH will call upon humanities scholars, teachers, filmmakers, museums, libraries, and other individuals and institutions to develop projects (and grant applications) to enhance and expand understanding of the most significant themes, personalities, and principles of our nation's history and culture. We hope to encourage humanists to think deeply about these themes, and to sponsor the best of such thought.

2. We will celebrate the "Heroes of History": The NEH will initiate and sponsor an annual lecture on Heroes and Heroism, the first of which will be held this February on President's Day. The lecture will feature a widely-respected historian, author, thinker, or other humanist who will discuss the life of an American hero and/or the ideal of heroism.

3. Finally, we will challenge young people to study the "Idea of America": NEH will sponsor an annual nationwide essay contest for secondary school students. Students will write a short (1200 words or less) essay on the "Idea of America"; their entries will be judged by a special NEH-convened panel of historians, authors, and other experts. The national winner will have his essay published in the NEH's *Humanities* magazine and receive an award at the annual "Heroes of History" lecture. Finalists will also have their essays published on the NEH web site.

Over the next couple years, "We the People" will expand

to include new grant competitions and categories, such as a model curricula competition, and expanded offerings in our Summer Seminars and Institutes series aimed at teaching American history content to history teachers. These are, of course, only first steps—but they are important ones to take. In the coming months and years, I want the NEH to help lead a renaissance in knowledge about our history and culture. Understanding ourselves is the first step to understanding our place in the world.

We all have a role to play. I want to enlist your help in that struggle. In your university, your communities, and in your families, is the best place to start the process of recovering our memories—recognizing, retelling, and retaining the story of who we are and what we stand for. As the "We the People" initiative proceeds, I hope the NEH can benefit from your advice and involvement.

It has been wonderful speaking to you because every day you cultivate the seedbeds of historical scholarship. You have my promise that the NEH will remain committed to documentary editions.

## Call for Papers

The 2003 ADE Program Committee, chaired by Esther Katz, would be happy to hear from anyone with ideas and/or proposals for papers and panels for the annual meeting to be held in Chicago, Nov. 14-16, 2003. The Committee is interested in, among other things, proposals for papers on new projects (and issues involved in starting new projects); on issues dealing with editing the papers of Native-Americans, African-American and other people of color; and on projects dealing with scientific and technical subjects, and issues relating to editing non-textual materials. However, proposals on other themes are also welcome. Please be sure to get your proposals in no later than 31 January 2003.

Send 1-2 page proposals to:

ADE 2003 Program Committee  
c/o Esther Katz  
New York University  
Sanger Papers Project  
History Department  
53 Washington Square South 7th fl  
New York, NY 10012