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A Future for Documentary Editions: The Historical Documents Study

ANN D. GORDON

No one doubted the wisdom of gathering information about current use of historical sources when the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and the American Council of Learned Societies launched the Historical Documents Study two years ago. The Commission would learn more about the context for its own decisions to support projects that publish and preserve historical documents. True to its mission to lead and educate in matters of the nation's documentary heritage, the Commission would also inform other agencies and individuals responsible for similar decisions affecting historical sources and research.

But a counterclaim disturbed the unanimity. Within and around the Commission an argument about the relative merits of granting funds to archivists or editors simmered and occasionally boiled over. Editing was under fire from archivists as an archaic way to preserve documents. The dispute worked its way into the conduct of the study itself, injecting an ulterior purpose of casting a definitive vote on the future of documentary editions at the Commission. History's chief lobbyist in Washington thought it her duty to make a case to the project director against further Commission support for editions. People routinely posed questions that staked out their own position in the argument; will the study succeed in showing that a) no one uses editions, or b) editorial scholarship is vital for knowledge and research? The advisory group, composed of representatives of the organizations authorized to appoint Commissioners, contained the same divisions.¹

In pursuit of its primary purpose, the study set out to learn the needs and practices of researchers. Since the late 1960s, when Walter Rundell conducted an inquiry for the Commission, published as *In Pursuit of American History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), the demand for historical sources had

changed significantly. Rundell limited his examination to uses defined within graduate departments of history, but current demand arises from legal questions, genealogical pursuits, historical museums and sites, preservation initiatives, environmental research, curiosity about and instruction in local history, and public and private sector administration, all in addition to academic scholarship. Quite independent of the feud over editions, this transformation of need for historical information had raised questions about training, libraries, ways to identify pertinent sources, access to documents, and coordination among professions serving researchers' needs.

The study conducted a survey about research experience among 2,000 members of historical and genealogical organizations. Data assembled from 1,394 replies form the core of a final report, *Using the Nation's Documentary Heritage*, and researchers' experience defines the context for most of the study's recommendations. The finding, for instance, that only a minority of people responding to the survey begin their inquiries at major research libraries suggests review of standards for distributing editions and guides to archival collections and for linking libraries through computerized information networks and interlibrary loan agreements. The finding that researchers of every stripe regard their inability to travel to sources as *the* major obstacle to their research suggests new perspectives on a host of issues, including the importance of microfilm and of published documents which the researcher can bring close to home.

The study also took up the challenge to look closely at documentary editing and the Commission's role in that work. Use of editions was examined through the survey, where respondents reported high use, and through questions asked of specific users who described why they turned to edited sources. The field of documentary editing was examined through research on recent publication, including an additional survey of sixty historical institutions. The Historical Documents Study recommends to the Commission that it regain its position of leadership in the field of documentary editing. At a time when editing flourishes as a significant sector of historical publishing and scholarship and researchers rely heavily on edited documents, the federal agency

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credited with sponsoring the modern age of historical editing risks losing sight of its mission. A decade ago, Henry F. Graff and A. Simone Reagor warned the Commission that its increasing work load as a funding agency was eroding its earlier work as "a leader in developing the field" of documentary editing and "a public voice of the people working in it." Since that time, the sense that the Commission functions as an ally of editorial work has eroded further. Chronically funded at levels below what it needs to carry out either one of its charges, to publish *or* preserve documents, the Commission has suffered from competition between two professional groups over a single, slim pot of federal money.²

The construction of competition in the Commission is unique. Editors define their work within a community of scholars and evaluate themselves by its terms for relevance, excellence, and usefulness. They aim not primarily to preserve documents but to enhance their evidentiary value by work that no individual researcher can match. Rather than acknowledging editing as research and scholarship of a particular order, critics within the Commission and their allies outside have tried to redefine editing as an extension of archival management and practice. In its most extreme form this line of argument postulates a spectrum of ways to preserve manuscripts, with editing for publication as a last and costly choice, when more urgent preservation work is done.

These terms of attack on editing do not dominate at other institutions sponsoring editions and they are not prominent at the National Endowment for the Humanities, the other federal agency that has committed itself to documentary publication. There, editions fall within a division for research programs, distinct from programs concerned with preservation.

In order to help the Commission understand its constituency in the field, the study looked at editing in one of its original homes, in the major historical societies and agencies based in the states. Only half of the sixty institutions polled had ever received funds for publication from the Commission. Thirty-six of them currently publish documentary volumes and others only await more resources in order to do so. Indeed most of the directors of publications not only affirmed their current editorial work but hope to expand it.

Quite uniformly the societies recognize that publication of sources translates into access to those sources. Their documents "provide scholars and readers with information not otherwise available" and "make information available to citizens in professional and accessible forms." A small group of the public agencies must meet statutory requirements to document state history, as in mandates to publish governors' papers. But by and large the volumes represent decisions about the

value and significance of a body of documents and the history they tell.

The Commission can begin to regain leadership by heeding the experiences and needs of these institutions. First, the directors speak loudly in favor of continuing the tradition of publishing books of edited documents. If they had the opportunity to expand their programs, the majority of directors would allocate new resources to books.

Second, they are now individually and in apparent isolation ready to experiment about the kinds of sources suitable for treatment by modern standards of documentary editing, experiments for which national leadership and example would be useful. They are thinking about new projects that break with their own customary definitions of what to edit and, in some cases, bring editorial discipline to new kinds of sources. Wish-lists contain editions based on extensive photographic and map collections, literary anthologies, collections that document social history and artistic activity, sources valuable primarily because of the uniqueness of their record about women or African Americans, and a series of documentary histories prepared to scholarly standards.

Third, like everyone involved in documentary editing, they are asking, what will be the impact of new technologies on the field? Editors face decisions about transcribing sources in machine-readable form, before they, researchers, and sponsors have debated how to balance the medium's obvious appeal against its uncertain future. People who misunderstand the editorial role talk about the new technologies rendering editors obsolete, without considering who will make what information available, if not the editor. Information and discussion are needed.

Finally, they have needs for support beyond what their individual institutions can supply. Some of the most innovative directors face backlogs of unfinished work, left on the shelf for lack of funding. The most common need is additional support for the cost of publication itself. As a group, they produce editions at the rate of one volume a year, and about half of them now must raise funds from outside the institution, more commonly at private institutions where extra staff is required for a major project.

For the Commission to lead among sponsors and editors preparing historical documents for publication is also to serve the needs of researchers. Demonstration that editions meet needs requires only a look at current scholarship, at the bibliographies of dozens of recent major books or the footnotes in any number of journals where new directions in research are evident. If an edition exists in a particular field of American history, the best workers in that field know of and use that edition. Equally vital but more difficult to retrieve are

lists of uses in legal briefs, film scripts, syllabi of history courses, presentations at National Parks, and the unpublished notes of people satisfying their curiosity.

From the survey of researchers, the study found use of editions at rates comparable to the use of other sources and exceeding the use of some archives. When asked outright, "have you used *edited* collections of historical sources in books or microforms?" more than half of the respondents answered yes.

The survey also asked respondents to list examples of published historical sources they had used. About two-thirds of them took the time to write down titles and types of publications which were then categorized, in order that the frequency with which different types of published sources appeared on the lists could be calculated.³ In the accompanying table, editions sponsored by the Commission are tabulated separately from other documentary editions. The first calculation indicates percentages based on the number of respondents to the question while the second one bases the percentages on the number of all respondents in the survey sample.

The question arises, against what standard should these measures of use be set, and there is no obvious answer. That the percentages exceed those for use of all the presidential libraries by this same group of researchers may be a comparison of some merit. Documentary editions receive significantly more use by these researchers than do moving pictures, videotapes, or

music; for all but legal historians, use of editions exceeds use of published court cases: among teachers, editions are used on a par with the archives of schools, museums, or religious institutions. These comparisons are not intended to rank sources but to suggest contexts for reading the numbers. The editions are vital tools to which researchers turn in considerable numbers.

What is it that researchers gain from edited documents? Two dozen prominent users of documentary editions spoke eloquently about the value of editorial scholarship and expertise to the conduct of their own research. Many of them gained the most from the compilation of documents from numerous sources. Scholars cannot match editors in their ability to travel in pursuit of sources on a topic. The thorough collection is then made easily usable by transcriptions and indexes. "[H]istorians before me had not only culled the archives for significant documents," wrote the author of a textbook, "but transcribed them, translated them, indexed them, and brought their special expertise to explaining them. Those documentary volumes, then, gave me quick access to individual voices from the era that I studied." Researchers rely, too, on the annotation that editors provide to clarify allusions and identify people, often very obscure people who loom large in the work of the researcher. "Superb" was the adjective chosen by a well-known biographer to describe the notes he consulted; their ability to identify people, he regarded as "the most valuable assets of the well-edited

**Use of Documentary Editions
By Association Membership**

	AASLH	ASLH	NCPH	NGS	OAH	ALL
<i>Respondents</i>						
N	210	105	107	295	341	879
NHPRC-funded editions	13%	20%	21%	4%	29%	14%
Documentary editions	31%	35%	45%	19%	56%	33%
Totals	44%	55%	66%	23%	85%	47%
<i>Survey Sample</i>						
N	370	157	188	438	537	1394
NHPRC-funded editions	8%	13%	12%	3%	19%	9%
Documentary editions	19%	23%	25%	13%	36%	21%
Totals	27%	36%	37%	16%	55%	30%

Notes: The category "documentary edition" in this table compiles the original category of that name with the tabulations for *Foreign Relations of the United States*, *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, and edited collections of colonial and state records. For more detail see note 3.

The associations are: the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), the American Society for Legal History (ASLH), the National Council on Public History (NCPH), the National Genealogical Society (NGS), and the Organization of American Historians (OAH). "All" is equal to returned questionnaires, while group totals take into account respondents' multiple memberships.

material” concerning associates of his subject.⁴

People rely on the scholarship of editors to augment their own work. An edition may be the deciding factor in taking on related research. This would seem to be the case for a number of documentary filmmakers whose own backgrounds and schedules make it virtually impossible to launch research from scratch in the primary sources but who benefit immensely from the assistance of editors and editions.⁵ An edition may simply transform the dimensions of what is possible for one scholar to consider. Biographers were particularly articulate on this point, but it also was mentioned by people at work on topics that intersected with an edition and who gained greater depth in some aspect of their topic because the editors had plowed the field.

Editors are themselves regarded as scholars in their field, and editions are valued for their impact on knowledge. In the phrase of one prominent historian, editors “become remarkably well-informed experts”; another described them as “scholars in their own right [who] add much to a researcher’s understanding.” One scholar regarded the principal edition in his field as the standard against which he tested all he wrote to make sure that he remains up-to-date. Editions were credited with “rais[ing] the level of scholarship” in their field and “obliging historians elsewhere to take [the topic] more seriously.” More than one edition has earned commendation as a landmark in its field of study.⁶

This is not to say that users have no questions about editions. Their questions raise more issues in the general national discussion of editing that is needed to continue developing the field. They have long asked, for instance, should the primary model from which most editors work continue to be the biographical edition documenting a lifetime? The question has lingered for years without adequate discussion or resolution. At issue are questions about the role of individuals in making history and the impact on historical interpretation of documenting one life. In a particularly hostile review, one critic called this the problem of expecting one life to “carry the burden for an entire discipline.”⁷

Researchers also consider what purposes should be met by editions that are perforce highly selective because the available documentation is massive. Selectivity often results from a project’s economic predicament, without there being a clear vision of what selection will offer. The strongest reservations about reliance on editions from the users contacted in this study all came from users of the same edition. Their cautions spoke not to the quality of the editorial work but to this relationship between the edition and a massive, modern political archives from which it derived. “The disadvantages,” wrote one scholar, “are that one tends to rely so heavily on excellent collections such as this as a substitute for research in the archives that excluded

material that may prove important is missed.” Or, in the words of another scholar, because “it remains unclear in what context certain documents appear” in the original records, “it is often very difficult to reconstruct administrative processes” on the basis of the edition alone.⁸

There are, however, researchers with diametrically opposed reactions. An historian of foreign relations, working in the same period but from different editions, spoke enthusiastically about good selections that defined which issues, which topics, which files would have the most valuable material when he went to the archives. From people using volumes of *Documentary Relations of the Southwest* and *Freedom*, this view of the edition as organizing an otherwise unmanageable mass of source material is even stronger. In other words, it is a question without a simple answer.

A commitment to editing does not preclude discussion of outstanding questions about what directions editions should take. The questions are numerous and range from matters of editorial style to intellectual debates about the meaning of the individual in history. They consider the impact of new technologies on a field traditionally defined by books and the appropriate response of an editing profession to the changing definitions of historical evidence. They concern the ideal relationship between producers of editions and the community of scholars and researchers served by that work and between continuity for long-range projects and shifting interests among researchers.

None of these questions exists in isolation. They inform basic decisions about what to edit, who will do it, how to get it done, and why the task is worth the cost, no matter where those decisions are made. Their discussion, however, may require that all parties take on what may be the most sensitive question: how are decisions to be made about balancing the needs for preservation and the support for editorial scholarship when those needs, no matter how different, ultimately vie for the same resources?

NOTES

1. Members of the advisory group, and the associations represented, were: Jeffrey J. Crow, for American Association for State and Local History; F. Gerald Ham, for National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators; Lawrence S. Kaplan, for Organization of American Historians; David E. Kyvig, for American Historical Association; Philip P. Mason, for Society of American Archivists; and Barbara B. Oberg, for Association for Documentary Editing.

2. Henry F. Graff and A. Simone Reagor, *Documentary Editing in Crisis: Some Reflections and Recommendations, A Report Prepared for the National Historical Publications and Records*