

Historians and the National Register¹

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IN MY MORE pessimistic moments I sometimes ask myself the irreverent question: "Why worry about manuscripts?" In this connection I was interested in Mr. Peckham's statement that manuscripts make librarians nervous. I am afraid that manuscripts also make some historians nervous — so nervous, indeed, that they avoid them altogether.

Anyone who has worked extensively with historical manuscripts knows that their use is toilsome, time-consuming, and expensive. Manuscripts on a subject of any breadth are usually scattered over considerable territory. To consult them the scholar either has to leave his family orphaned and impoverished and go it alone on his quest, or he has to take the family along, lodge in boarding houses or third-class hotels, cut corners on food and clothing, and, if fortunate, live a part of the time on the hospitality of friends and relatives and hope and pray that illness "will stay away from my do'." Last but not least, the use of manuscripts, particularly when travel is involved, entails much physical labor, in loading and unloading necessary impedimenta at stops along the way. Why go through all of this suffering?

This question is the more pertinent because books can be written without using manuscripts. Indeed, if one will look over the list of current publications in American history, I think he will find that most of the authors included in that list have made little or no use of manuscripts. Some authors apparently follow the practice of including a few manuscript references in their footnotes in order to impress readers with the scholarly character of their work. Be that as it may, it is a sad fact that a substantial portion of authors in the field of American history never darken the door of a manuscript depository, much less make any extensive use of unpublished materials.

¹ Paper read at a joint meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association and the Society of American Archivists at Madison, Wisconsin, April 24, 1954. The National Register is now called the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections.

If popular appeal is an author's objective, his chance of success seems considerably better if he will stay away from manuscripts, dream up some startling new hypotheses, and descant brilliantly upon them.

One might argue that the historian's best procedure would be to write a "peace of mind" book, make a comfortable stake, and then turn to scholarly writing. If anyone in the audience should think this a worthwhile suggestion, I should like to suggest to him the very promising title: "How to be Happy While Awaiting Hydrionization."

Seriously speaking, there is a case for manuscripts, and a good one. I should hasten to say, however, that manuscripts derive no special sanctity from the mere fact of being manuscripts. It is better to use good printed works than poor manuscripts. It is better to make good use of printed works than poor use of manuscripts, however good the manuscripts may be. Amazingly dull and disappointing books can be written after exhaustive study of excellent manuscripts. In using manuscripts, as in exploiting other types of material, the important thing is to know how to read the signs — to know what roads to go down — and to know the meaning of the sources, to know what they add up to.

Another important consideration is the kind of book that the author is trying to write. Bruce Catton's recent biography of Grant, an excellent book in every way, did not require the use of manuscripts. Mr. Catton's objective was a brief readable summary based on existing published knowledge. But Catton's book is a much better volume because of the use that others had made of manuscripts, and especially because of the extensive digging in primary sources that Lloyd Lewis had done.

Manuscripts properly used are unquestionably an asset to most scholarly works in history. They add to the understanding of people and events, especially of people. History deals in large measure with human beings, and I know of no better way of understanding people of past times than through the study of their personal papers and the personal papers of their intimate associates. To be sure, personal papers of many prominent people have been published, but until recently publication was often preceded by screening and polishing. And even now published correspondence and diaries usually represent a considerable degree of selection.

Manuscripts also help the historian to avoid error. One specific example will bear out this point. The editor of a recent two-volume compilation of Civil War documents, which includes only one small

manuscript collection, states that the morals of Civil War soldiers were remarkably good; and his implication is that the morals of Johnny Rebs and Billy Yanks were considerably better than those of American soldiers of World War I and World War II. A wide use of manuscript sources, such as soldiers' letters and diaries, medical records, and inspection reports, would have made this editor less certain of the exceptional morality of soldiers of the Civil War. The true picture of the seamy side of soldiering in that war, as in most others, can be had only from unpublished works; for compilers, in preparing letters, diaries, and other original sources for publication, usually have deleted statements reflecting adversely on morals. Uncensored manuscripts of the period indicate that the morals of Civil War soldiers were no better and no worse than those of soldiers of other times. The same is true of their conduct in battle. If one reads only the printed accounts he gets a distorted view of the battle performance of Civil War soldiers, because most of the statements that tell of defection, cowardice, and panic in combat were usually omitted, or at best inaccurately recounted, in unit histories, personal narratives, and official reports. If one wants to get a realistic account of how soldiers behaved in battle he must go to the manuscripts.

Then too, the use of manuscripts is eminently satisfactory to the historian. The reading of personal letters, for example, gives him a sense of closeness to his subject. If he is writing about a soldier he gets acquainted with his hopes and fears, his strengths and weaknesses, and his thought patterns. To him the soldier reveals his innermost and most intimate self.

The user of manuscripts experiences the thrill of discovery. He has the sense of walking over untrodden — and hence holy — ground. He has the satisfying sense of adding to the existing body of knowledge. And finally, he experiences the sheer joy of reading letters and diaries. These personal documents abound in human interest, and the historian who uses them learns to share the experiences of his subject. Through manuscripts he is able to live the history he is writing. In reading a soldier's letters he learns to know the soldier's friends and family, he experiences the excitement of going to war, he feels the enormous tenseness of the baptism of fire, the discomforts of the march, the loneliness and the fun of camp, the devotion to loved ones. And then when his soldier dies in battle, the historian experiences genuine sadness; for, in a sense, he has suffered a personal loss.

In sum, there *is* a case for manuscripts, and these precious docu-

ments are worth all of the inconvenience, toil, and impoverishment that their use requires.

How will the national register help the historian? In the first place, the register will help him to find a feasible research topic. A vital consideration is the existence of a substantial and manageable body of pertinent manuscript material. The national register will help a researcher establish the existence or nonexistence of such an unexploited body of material.

In the second place, the register will aid the historian by helping him plan his research travel. The register will tell him where key manuscript collections are located and how extensive they are and will give him an idea of how long he will need to stay at various depositories.

In the third place, the register will help the historian by reducing the expense of research. The register will facilitate photographic reproduction, which will in turn reduce the amount of travel required. And travel is becoming an increasingly formidable obstacle to research. Even the most generous fellowships and grants-in-aid will not meet the expenses incurred for lodging, food, travel, and other necessary aspects of a research program. Few who have not engaged in itinerant research since World War II know how very much the cost has increased in recent years. And unless some means can be found of reducing this cost the effects on scholarly production are going to be very unfavorable.

Then, the register will be of assistance to the historian in that it will reduce the likelihood of his overlooking important collections bearing on the subject of his research.

An incidental benefit of the register will be the influence that it will have in stimulating regional depositories to prepare meaningful catalogs of their own collections. Many depositories, including some of the larger and older ones, do not have comprehensive and easily usable descriptions of their collections. The register may well stimulate directors of these depositories to refine their cataloging procedures and bring their inventories up to date.

Perhaps I can pin down the point that I am trying to make by referring to my own experience in attempting to write a history of the Southern Confederacy. In the research for this history I am trying to locate the personal papers of Confederate notables such as President Jefferson Davis, the cabinet, and the members of the Confederate congress. The congress is one of the obscure quantities of Confederate history. The Southern lawmakers have been generally condemned as inept and inefficient, but no one has taken

the trouble to make a thorough investigation of their background, abilities, difficulties, and accomplishments. It seems to me that the digging out and studying of the personal papers of these leaders while they were in congress is indispensable to an accurate estimate of their role in Confederate history. But it is very difficult to locate the personal papers of Confederate congressmen. These legislators numbered more than 260 and their papers are scattered far and wide, from the Huntington Library in California to the Boston Athenaeum. If I could take my alphabetical list of Confederate congressmen to a national register, check it against the card catalog there, and ascertain what personal collections are available, where they are located, and how extensive they are, my research effort would be reduced by many weeks and hundreds of dollars.

Hence, it seems reasonable to hope and believe that a national register will do much to expedite and facilitate historical research and to improve the quality of historical writing.

Now I should like to make a few specific comments on the plan for the register as outlined by Mr. Land.

In the first place the plan makes sense. It makes sense in that it proposes to utilize information which depositories already have at hand. Sensible and practicable also is the scheme of beginning with newly acquired holdings. As collections are accessioned, descriptions of them have to be prepared. It should be very easy for directors to send duplicate descriptions to the Library of Congress for inclusion in the national register.

I am glad to see that the project has as an ultimate objective the inclusion of manuscripts in private possession. I am more convinced than ever that many valuable manuscripts still have not reached public depositories. A good example is the diary of Robert G. H. Kean, chief of the Bureau of War in the Confederate War Department. This manuscript was recently uncovered in Richmond and is being edited by Edward Younger of the University of Virginia. Because of Kean's strategic position he was able to observe at close range the working of the Confederate administration. He received valuable first-hand impressions of Jefferson Davis, the cabinet members, and various congressmen. These observations he confided to his diary, and the manuscript throws valuable new light on characteristics of Southern leaders, military policy, and other important aspects of Confederate administration. Yet this valuable diary had remained in private possession all these years, unknown to historians and unused by them.

Recently I discovered the letters of a Georgia Confederate con-

gressman to his wife, written while he was in Richmond in 1864-65. Letters of Confederate congressmen for this period are exceedingly scarce. The legislator's correspondence tells not only about his congressional activities but also about many details of his life, such as the places where he boarded, the prices he paid for his meals, his impressions of his associates, and the routine of his daily existence. His letters even show that he was reduced to doing his own washing to enable him to live on the relatively low salary paid to a congressman of that time. I think it is reasonable to hope that a national register will help to ferret out and to get into public depositories manuscripts of the type that I have described.

In this connection I suggest that as the project gets under way, individual scholars be solicited through historical journals to send in lists and descriptions of private manuscript collections that they have uncovered in their research. Almost any scholar who does extensive research in manuscripts learns about valuable holdings in private possession and I am sure that he will be glad, barring some restriction, to make known and have included in the national register a descriptive statement about these manuscripts and their location.

I am delighted to see the proposal to include Mexican and Canadian manuscripts in the national register. My study of the Confederacy would be greatly facilitated if I had an inventory of the holdings in the archives of the northern provinces of Mexico.

I hope that a plan may be worked out to include chronological and subject heading classification for the cards in the register. Such a classification, I think, would make the register of far greater use to historians.

All in all, I think the plan excellently conceived and of tremendous potential value to historians. I hope earnestly that the project may be initiated in the very near future.