

Editing the Henry Clay Papers

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I RATHER think that my experience in helping collect and edit the Henry Clay papers enables me to speak as an expert on how *not* to operate a project of this kind. Despite my qualifications in this respect, however, I do not wish to dwell on that unhappy phase of the subject. Perhaps, if I were permitted to offer one small piece of advice to prospective editors of the papers of great men, I should urge that adequate financial backing be assured before a project is launched. Typists, clerks, researchers, and assistant editors are needed, and they must be paid. Our own project has no endowment. Most of our support has been provided by the University of Kentucky Research Fund Committee, which has been generous with its limited funds but cannot favor one project over others in progress on our campus. A few interested individuals have contributed to the good cause, but our cash income has never been large enough to enable us to employ the personnel needed for efficient operation. We think we have made substantial progress, nevertheless, in performing the task we set for ourselves.

From the beginning it has been our purpose to obtain copies, preferably microfilm or photostats, of all available letters written by Henry Clay, letters to him, his speeches, other writings of which he was the author, and significant items about him. We realize, of course, that publication of this whole mass of material is an impossibility, but we believe we are doing a service to scholars by bringing it together and making it available. We desire to publish as much as seems advisable, perhaps excluding speeches found in older compilations and including both sides of the more important correspondence. Occasionally, abstracts rather than complete texts of incoming letters will be used, and purely routine matters will be noted. The number of volumes will be limited to about six, in which the documents will be arranged chronologically.

Our first task, that of discovering and obtaining copies of Clay material, has been complicated by the fact that we seldom know specifically for what we are searching. Unlike Thomas Jefferson,

¹ Paper read at the annual meeting of the Southern Historical Association at Durham, North Carolina, November 1956. The author, professor of history at the University of Kentucky, is editor for the Clay Papers Project.

Clay kept no "epistolary record," and at the beginning of the project we had no very definite idea of the extent of his correspondence. He seldom, if ever, took the trouble to make copies of outgoing letters although in a few cases we have been fortunate enough to locate rough drafts. Incoming letters were not preserved systematically — not even those written to various members of the family by Clay himself when he was away from home. One cannot begin to estimate how many of those that *were* kept during his lifetime were dispersed after his death — dispersed in part at least in the manner suggested by the following newspaper clipping:

Applications being continually made to the family of the late Henry Clay for autographs and other mementoes of the illustrious dead, the Lexington Observer has been requested to say that all such articles as they can part with have been disposed of. The number supplied has been so large as to leave the family only such memorials as they wish to preserve.

The mementoes retained by the family were, of course, divided among the children, then among the children's children, and even further down the line until they became well scattered. A few sizable collections of papers were preserved. One, kept for years in a rather famous lard can in the attic of the Clay house, disappeared under mysterious circumstances within the past decade. Others, fortunately, have happier histories. At least one or two were even enlarged by Clay descendants, who were able to add items received through gifts and purchases. Fortunately, also, two of the largest of these collections found their way into the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, which houses by far the greatest volume of Clay papers in existence today.

We pause to thank Heaven for the Library of Congress and other manuscript depositories after each of the numerous frustrating experiences we have had in trying to track down stray documents. Sometimes we have been able to recognize a stone wall in time to keep from banging our heads against it for a long period. For example, a search for the papers of a man who was once Clay's private secretary led rather quickly to a letter in our own university library, which set our minds sadly at rest. To a correspondent who asked for a Clay autograph, John B. Fry wrote on March 22, 1888, that he was unable to comply with the request because "In the month of April, 1851, at the Howard Hotel, cor. Broadway & Maiden Lane, N. York, where I lived at the time, there came a fire one night which destroyed all my letters from Mr. Clay down to that date as well as a very voluminous mass of other valuable correspondence."

Turning from that story, which has a familiar ring to the ears of

every person who has ever gone on the prowl for manuscripts, I can point to another instance when complete frustration came only after long weeks of effort. A few years ago a kind lady in Canada wrote that she once knew a person, now dead, in one of the Latin American countries who had collected Clay material. She told how to get in touch with the gentleman's former secretary, who could perhaps give some information about the disposition of the collection. Letters from our project went out to the secretary and also to the director of the national library of that country, asking for help. The response was immediate and generous. The ex-secretary located several boxes of material that had belonged to her former employer and, after an encouraging word from me, wrote that she had ready for shipment a packing case containing Colton's *Private Correspondence of Henry Clay*, two or three compilations of Clay's speeches, the Rev. Samuel L. Southard's *Sermon on the Life and Death of Henry Clay*, W. H. Macfarland's *Discourse on the Life of the Honorable Henry Clay*, a volume entitled *Obituary Addresses on the Occasion of the Death of the Hon. Henry Clay, June 30, 1852*, and other items of similar nature. But she had found no manuscripts. At the risk of appearing ungrateful, we had to tell the lady that we had no need for this material. We thanked her and suggested that she keep it in memory of her former employer or that she dispose of it as she saw fit, perhaps to a library in her own country.

The director of the national library was also most helpful. His early reports, revealing that the material contained some manuscripts (which had passed into the hands of the collector's widow), were highly encouraging. Eventually, however, he delivered the following crusher:

Dear Mr. Hopkins: I have your esteemed letter of the 4th. inst., and I can assure you that we have made a thorough investigation about Mrs. ——— and those manuscripts, finding out that Mrs. ———, after her husband death, became mad and thrown away those manuscripts; therefore, they never came to the Biblioteca Nacional, or to any other official Institution.

There the matter rests. Perhaps the collection included no manuscripts; perhaps there were some that were thrown away or destroyed; or perhaps another letter from someone will bring welcome news that they still exist and are available for our use. Such uncertainties help to make our work interesting.

The two persons just mentioned, who were eager to help (and for whose assistance we are deeply grateful), are by no means unique. One of the very pleasant features of the project is the willingness

of so many people to do all they can to lend aid and encouragement. Even manuscript dealers, who steadfastly refuse to permit us to have photocopies of their stock in trade, have in some instances helped us get in touch with purchasers of manuscripts or have given friendly advice. A very, very few private persons, most of them members of the Clay family, were suspicious at first; but with one or two exceptions they eventually agreed to cooperate. Illness and old age have kept some collectors from responding immediately to pleas for assistance, but we have found that patience on our part usually pays dividends in the long run.

It would be almost impossible to list the institutions and individuals who in this respect have shown generosity toward the Clay project. Newspapers and scholarly journals have carried notices of the work, and we have been helped by many persons who have given leads to items that we might otherwise not have located. Archivists, librarians, curators of historical societies, manuscript collectors, members of the Clay family, and plain private persons have almost without exception responded generously to requests for copies of materials in their possession. Our files contain copies of documents received from about 120 different sources, mainly in our own country but reaching from Switzerland to Hawaii.

By far the greatest help of this nature has come from the National Historical Publications Commission, of which Philip M. Hamer is Executive Director. Not only has the Commission, through Dr. Hamer, sent us without charge photocopies of thousands of documents in the National Archives, but by special arrangement a tremendous number of manuscripts in the Library of Congress are being filmed for us. During several visits to Washington I searched out some of the material, and the remainder has been located by Dr. Hamer's researchers, who are still working at the task.

Every item received on film or photostat must be transcribed, and we try in each case to make a copy as near like the original as can be done on a typewriter. There is no need, when speaking to an audience of historians, of going into detail regarding the problems involved at this stage of the game. Clay himself wrote a small, neat script, which is relatively easy to read, and he was consistent and rather orthodox in spelling and punctuation. The same cannot be said of all his correspondents. The handwriting of some of them is almost undecipherable, and their ideas of capitalization, spelling, punctuation, abbreviations, and grammar were strictly individualistic. To make matters worse, manuscripts that have not had proper

care are often mutilated and dim and consequently do not show up clearly in a photocopy.

Most of our material is on microfilm, from which we type copies directly. As all of you know, this work is hard on the eyes and trying to the patience. Film is frequently in such poor condition that the reader has difficulty determining whether a dot is a period, part of a heavy pen stroke showing through from the other side of the paper, a mark on the film, or merely a fly speck. Photostats are more like the original manuscripts and are easier than microfilm to transcribe. Some of the projects similar to ours do not even attempt to work with microfilm, but use enlarged paper prints for the transcription work. Financial considerations prevent our following that procedure, although I am now almost convinced that in the long run it actually saves time and money. In any case, the work of transcribing from photocopies is extremely difficult, and most people (including me) are not capable of doing it well. On the Clay project only the associate editor, Mary Wilma Hargreaves, is able to do a consistently good job of such transcription.

We have been spared one of the problems that have confronted workers on the Jefferson, Lincoln, and perhaps other projects: no one, to my knowledge, ever bothered to forge a Clay letter. The monetary value of documents signed by Clay has not been high enough to attract the attention of people who do such things, although I note that prices of Clay items in manuscript dealers' catalogs have risen markedly in the past few years. The unknown intruder who burglarized our office last month may have been searching for original letters to sell or add to his own collection, but if that was his objective he was sadly disappointed.

Facsimiles, which are almost impossible to detect on microfilm, have caused concern in a few cases. We acquired from different sources four or five copies of a letter Clay wrote to Jacob Stratton in 1842 before we discovered that a facsimile of this document had been tipped in as an illustration for a book about a century ago. We must have about a dozen copies of it by this time, and nearly everybody who owns one doubtless thinks he has an original letter. The librarian of a university once took me to a floor case that held a display of manuscripts and pointed to a Clay ALS — the Stratton item. My expression of doubt led him to remove the document for closer inspection, whereupon its character became clearly apparent. Nevertheless, he replaced it carefully, remarking that the good lady in charge of the collection was so proud of her manuscripts that he refused to disillusion her.

Just a few days ago a Methodist minister from a neighboring Bluegrass town generously sent us a typescript of an autograph letter in his possession. Our files revealed that we already had a copy on microfilm, obtained from the Huntington Library in California. When I wrote the minister of this fact and asked if we might some time see the original of his manuscript, he brought it to us and aided in determining that it was a facsimile. Strangely, the letter, which covers the first of four pages of paper, was folded to fit an envelope, and it bears the penciled notation that "This letter was given to me by Mrs. McDowell, granddaughter of Henry Clay. /signed/ Thomas J. Dodd." I might add that Mrs. McDowell, who lived for years at Ashland, the Clay estate, had many manuscripts in her possession. We have no way of knowing if she considered this item an original when she gave it to Mr. Dodd. Its present owner was disappointed to find his ALS only a facsimile, but he gamely insists that the fun he had in investigating to decide the point was almost worth the price. We are now wondering if the copy in the Huntington Library is the original or another facsimile — and why a facsimile was made in the first place.

Like many other Americans of his day, Clay sometimes published letters in the newspapers over a pen-name. His favorite nom-de-plume was "Scaevola" although he sometimes used others. To add to the confusion, there were some "Scaevola" letters that were not written by Clay, and in consequence each one must be examined most critically in an effort to determine its authorship. On occasion, moreover, he undoubtedly contributed unsigned matter to newspapers. Duff Green wrote to John C. Calhoun in 1827 that someone had "demanded of Clay to know whether he was the author of an Editorial article in the Journal. Mr. Clay got out of the difficulty by saying he had not read the article in question — giving the question of authorship the go." I am afraid that we shall have to give not only the question of authorship but all such material "the go" unless we can find conclusive evidence in connection with specific articles.

Even printed speeches can cause difficulty. Clay complained, as did other members of Congress, that his speeches were not reported correctly. One person who wanted to know exactly what Clay had said on some point would not be satisfied with the account in the *Register of Debates* because "he regarded it as a matter so intimately connected with the preservation of free government, that he could not and would not trust a reported speech, since that might have received the interpretation of the reporters and could

not therefore be relied upon with accuracy." Nevertheless, Clay rarely took the trouble to correct the reported version of his efforts, and he rarely put a speech on paper. Those published in compilations during his lifetime were included after he had been consulted, but we do not know how carefully he checked them.

In spite of all the problems involved, we who are connected with the Clay project enjoy our work. I cannot claim that we have discovered anything startlingly new or that we shall cause drastic revisions in the interpretation of American history. I am convinced, however, that our contribution will have real value. Details of Clay's activities as a land lawyer, as an agent for eastern mercantile firms with western connections, and as a speculator and business entrepreneur in his own right will aid in reaching a better understanding of the economic history of the period — as will expositions of his views on the currency problems that bedeviled the people of Kentucky and the West. Political and social historians, of course, will also find interesting and important material in his correspondence, and from it all will emerge a clearer picture of Clay himself.

One does not see in his letters the confirmed gambler, philanderer, and intriguer described by his political enemies. One sees, instead, an astute lawyer, a politician who was earnest in his opinions about men and issues, a gentleman farmer who had a genuine interest in agriculture, and an affectionate husband and father. Though many of his letters are forthright and businesslike, most of them are characterized by gracefulness and a striking felicity of expression. His courtly attitude toward female correspondents and his frankness toward men show something of his charm and personal appeal, both social and political. My associate, Mrs. Hargreaves, and my colleague in the Kentucky History Department, Clement Eaton (who has just completed a biography of Clay), agree in calling him "a Victorian gentleman."

In 1842, with his mind on the next presidential canvass, Whig stalwart Robert P. Letcher wrote as follows to a friend and political confidant regarding the prospects of their fellow Kentuckian, the Honorable Henry Clay:

Dear Crittenden, — The old Prince is taking a pretty considerable rise everywhere, I can tell you. I guess he now begins to see the good of leaving the Senate, — of *getting off* awhile merely to *get on* better. He must hereafter remain a little quiet and *hold his jaw*. In fact, he must be *caged*, — that's the point, *cage him*! He swears by all the gods, he will keep cool and stay at home. I rather think he will be prudent, though I have some occasional fears that he may write too many letters; still, he is quite a handy man with the pen, and his letters have *some good* reading in them.

It is not within my province to discuss the "old Prince's" prudence or lack of it or to concede that sometimes he may have written too many letters — especially in that particular campaign, when he managed to place himself on the unpopular side of the question of the annexation of Texas. I do bear witness, however, that he was nearly always "quite a handy man with the pen," and we who work with his papers sincerely hope that others will agree with Salty Bob Letcher and us that Clay's letters do indeed "have *some good* reading in them."