"... authentic Documents tending to elucidate our History"

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National Historical Publications Commission

LIKE many a hapless elected official faced with the necessity of delivering a presidential address, I have toyed with many topics on which I might conceivably have something to say. There were words of wisdom on records appraisal, accessioning, and disposal, for example, that might have echoed down the corridors of history under the title "Don't Throw Them All Away," a title with which for some time I was much enamored; but I was persuaded to turn to another field by friends who are wiser, or at least more discreet, than I. To the surprise of practically no one, I am sure, I am therefore going to speak on certain aspects of the publication of historical documents in the United States. In doing so I shall necessarily pay some attention to the role of the National Historical Publications Commission, with which, I am happy to say, I have been associated for more than a decade.

My title, as announced to you by our presiding officer this evening, is a phrase written almost a century and three-quarters ago by Ebenezer Hazard, whom Fred Shelley has termed "America's First Historical Editor."[1]

Even before the American Revolution Hazard was dreaming of and planning for the publication of a many-volumed collection of historical documents to be entitled "American State Papers." In 1774, in a letter to a friend, he made a prophecy and expressed an obligation that are as meaningful to present-day archivists and editors and their patrons as they were in Hazard's day. "The time

* Presidential address, delivered at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Kansas City, Mo., Oct. 6, 1961. Dr. Hamer, a Fellow of the Society, has been a university professor and has written extensively in the field of Tennessee history. For the National Archives he edited its *Guide* (1948) and *Federal Records of World War II* (2 vols., 1951); and in recent years he has supervised the compilation and editing of the National Historical Publications Commission's *Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States* (New Haven, 1961). He was a member of the National Archives staff from 1935 to 1950, and in 1950 he became Executive Director of the National Historical Publications Commission. He retired on Nov. 30, 1961, but he will no doubt continue to contribute significantly to the historical and archival professions in the United States.

[1] Title of Mr. Shelley's article in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 12:44–73 (Jan. 1955).

will doubtless come," he wrote, "when early periods of American history will be eagerly inquired into, and it is the duty of every generation to hand to its successor the necessary means of acquiring such knowledge, in order to prevent their groping in the dark, and perplexing themselves in the labrinths of error."[2]

A few weeks later Hazard waited on John Adams in New York, requesting his assistance, and he so impressed the future President of the United States that the latter recorded in his diary: "Hazard is certainly very capable of the Business he has undertaken—he is a Genius."[3]

And a genius Hazard was. His project for compiling and publishing historical documents was boldly conceived—remarkably broad for his time. He was an informed and assiduous collector. He conducted a person-to-person campaign that Madison Avenue, had there been one then, would have envied. He sought and obtained the support of many men of prominence. On the same day that he saw John Adams, for example, he wrote to Thomas Jefferson, soliciting his help, and it is entirely characteristic of that brilliant young Virginian that he not only praised Hazard's plan but compiled a long list of items appropriate for inclusion in the proposed publication.[4]

Hazard proceeded slowly—as in later years so many ambitious but overburdened editors of historical documents have been compelled to do—but on July 11, 1778, he formally presented to Henry Laurens, President of the Continental Congress, a request that the Congress, which he flatteringly characterized as "the Friends of Science, as well at the Guardians of our Liberties," give its patronage and assistance to his project.[5] It is likely that the leaders in that body were already well acquainted with it and predisposed toward it. At any rate a committee to which the matter was referred reported its opinion that Hazard's undertaking deserved "the public patronage and encouragement, as being productive of public utility." The Congress then recommended to the several States that they assist Hazard by admitting him "to an inspection of public records" and by furnishing him, without expense, "with copies of such papers" as he might judge valuable for

[2] Hazard to Jonathan Trumbull, Aug. 3, 1774, quoted by Shelley in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 12:48.

[3] *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, ed. by Lyman H. Butterfield, 2:109 (Cambridge, Mass., 1961).

[4] Hazard to Thomas Jefferson, Aug. 23, 1774, with printed proposals and Jefferson's list, and Jefferson to Hazard, Apr. 30, 1775, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. by Julian P. Boyd, 1:144–149, 164–165 (Princeton, N. J., 1950).

[5] "Continental Miscellany" file, in Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

his purpose. (How familiar is the sound of that to present-day archivists!) It recommended further that "private gentlemen" also assist Hazard; and it resolved that "to sustain" the expense of his activities "one thousand dollars be advanced him upon account."[6]

Thus, in the midst of the Revolution, when the young Nation was struggling through dark days to make independence a reality, the Government of the United States gave assistance to the preservation of records of historical value, setting an example and a pattern that in years to come were to be remembered and, at least sporadically, followed.

Hazard's work on his collection was further delayed, perhaps because of his duties as Postmaster General (as modern editors are delayed by noneditorial duties). Thus it is 1791 before we find him seeking Jefferson's assistance once again. He sent to the Secretary of State part of his unpublished compilation, asking for a letter that might encourage subscriptions, and he received in reply Jefferson's letter of February 18, 1791, which is now well known to archivists and editors of historical source materials, but which, nevertheless, in our profession merits frequent repeating. "Time and accident," wrote Jefferson, "are committing daily havoc on the originals deposited in our public offices: . . . the lost cannot be recovered; but let us save what remains; not by vaults and locks, which fence them from the public eye . . . but by such a multiplication of Copies as shall place them beyond the reach of accident." The letter was printed in Hazard's proposals for the publication of his collection. In this collection, Hazard announced, there would be "Charters of the several States . . . Extracts from Public Records;—and other authentic Documents tending to elucidate our History."[7] Only two volumes of the *Historical Collections* were ever published because, despite distinguished patronage, sales were disappointing and plans for additional volumes were abandoned.[8]

I do not propose to outline in detail the documentary publication ventures of the next century and a half. But, just as the National Historical Publications Commission has given first attention

[6] *Journals of the Continental Congress*, ed. by Worthington C. Ford, 11:682, 705 (Washington, 1908). The committee's report, in the hand of Richard Henry Lee, is in the papers of the Continental Congress, Item 19, III, f. 75, in the National Archives.

[7] "Proposals for Printing by Subscription, a Collection of State Papers, Intended as Materials for An History of the United States of America," broadside dated at Philadelphia, Feb. 24, 1791, in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The broadside prints a letter from Jefferson approving the project and bears the signatures of some 70 subscribers, among them many signers of the Declaration of Independence and the U. S. Constitution.

[8] Shelley in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 12:67–70.

to the papers of the Founding Fathers, it seems appropriate for me to pay, as I have, more than passing tribute to Hazard as the United States pioneer in the field of documentary publication.

The spirit of Hazard lived on. The collection and publication of historical documents were notable and most laudable activities of the Massachusetts Historical Society, the New-York Historical Society, and many other independent historical agencies. In the earlier years of the twentieth century the American Historical Association was importantly active in this publication field, and in those years too the Carnegie Institution of Washington added many volumes of valuable documents to the source materials conveniently available for historical research.

A number of the States did pioneering work in publishing materials in foreign archives and in their own archives relating to the colonial period of their history. The States, in fact, led in this documentary publication activity, while the Federal Government lagged. And one of the finest, the most concrete, of the accomplishments of State archival agencies today is the revival or the continuation of the publication of their early records. As evidence of this one has only to note, for example, the ambitious, boldly conceived, and ably executed program of the South Carolina Archives Department for the publication of its colonial and State records; the steady flow of the published papers of Tarheel statesmen issued by the North Carolina Department of Archives and History and the plans of that Department to publish a new and enlarged edition of its colonial records; the publication by the Tennessee Historical Commission of Robert H. White's *Messages of the Governors of Tennessee* and its cooperation with Vanderbilt University and the University of Tennessee in preparing to publish, respectively, the papers of James K. Polk and those of Andrew Johnson; and the support given by Delaware's Public Archives Commission to plans for publication of the correspondence of John Dickinson. It is greatly to be hoped that State archival and historical agencies will recognize in the future, even more effectively than they have in the past, the importance of documentary publication as a function for which they have a major responsibility—a responsibility comparable to that which they have also for their accessioning, preservation, and reference service functions, with which publication is so closely and importantly associated.

On the national scene, the Congress of the United States gave support—quite a lot of support—to the publication of historical documents during the nineteenth century and the first half of the

twentieth—through subsidy, subscription, and continuing appropriations for various programs—but the Federal Government cannot be said to have exerted any real leadership in this field. A list of Government-sponsored documentary publications for that period would be impressive in length, but it would illustrate the fact that the Government did not have, at midtwentieth century, a central plan of publication for itself or for the Nation. J. Franklin Jameson, long an advocate of documentary publications, said in 1906 that "we have 'made the dirt fly' before we have mapped our isthmus."[9] More than half a century ago, he saw the need for and advocated, with eventual success, the establishment of a national commission on the publication of historical documents, which came into being in 1934 as the National Historical Publications Commission, in the act establishing the National Archives.

For the fact that a blueprint for action exists today for the publication of the papers of American leaders, we have to thank, above all, two people: Julian P. Boyd and Harry S. Truman. It was the former who conceived and realized in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* a product so outstanding in scope and in scholarly achievement that it has fixed the bench mark for all similar succeeding enterprises. (The series now runs to 16 published volumes of a projected 50 or more.) And it was President Truman who on May 17, 1950, when he was officially presented with the first copy of the first published volume of Boyd's edition of Jefferson's papers, saw that here was something more than the first fruits of a worthy editorial project. Here was a challenge. What was being done for Jefferson, he thought, could and should be done for other American leaders. He threw this challenge, by way of a directive to survey and report on the situation, to the National Historical Publications Commission.

Reconstructed by the Federal Records Act of 1950 to represent all three branches of the Federal Government as well as private

[9] J. Franklin Jameson, "Gaps in the Published Records of United States History," in *American Historical Review*, 11:818 (July 1906). See also the 1908 report of the Assistant Committee on the Documentary Historical Publications of the United States Government, of which Jameson was secretary, containing a detailed survey of documentary publications by the Federal Government, calling attention to gaps, and recommending the establishment of a permanent commission on national historical publications, printed in 60th Cong., 2d sess., *S. Doc.* 714, p. 9–45 (serial 5408); and Lyman H. Butterfield, "Archival and Editorial Enterprises in 1850 and in 1950; Some Comparisons and Contrasts," in American Philosophical Society, *Proceedings*, 98:159–170 (1954). "A Selective List of Documentary Historical Publications of the United States Government" constitutes an appendix in National Historical Publications Commission, *A National Program for the Publication of Historical Documents*, p. 98–106 (Washington, 1954).

scholarship, revitalized by the President's vision, and staunchly supported by the Archivist of the United States, the Commission —after consultation with historians, custodians of archives and historical manuscripts, and other scholars—presented a preliminary report to President Truman in May 1951. A followup report was published in the spring of 1954. Entitled *A National Program for the Publication of Historical Documents*, it was presented to President Eisenhower, who, like his predecessor in the Presidency, gave his blessing to the program. In 1957 a congressional resolution endorsed it and called for Government and private cooperation. In 1958 the Chief Justice of the United States praised the program. And on Tuesday of this week President Kennedy, speaking at a Washington ceremony marking the publication of the first 4 volumes of *The Adams Papers*, with "only 80 or a hundred more to go," noted "how difficult it ever is to feel that we have finally gotten to the 'bone' of truth" and affirmed his belief that publication of the original records "does open the doors."[10]

The Commission's program is broad in scope, recommending extensive publication of the letters and other papers of Americans who have contributed importantly to the development of the United States in many varied fields, as well as selected documents pertaining to subject areas; but major emphasis so far has been on the publication of the papers of the Founding Fathers. As Julian Boyd has pointed out, these men took part in "one of the most elevated public debates on the nature of free institutions that any country has ever produced."[11] They laid the foundations not only of our Government but of our way of life. They were men of intellect, of ideas, and of ideals. Their minds were far-ranging and their correspondence equally so. The beginnings of our being as a Nation scarcely can be understood and certainly cannot be fully illuminated without the comprehensive publication of the papers of these men. In these papers, in both practical and philosophic terms, is the clear exposition of the principles to which this Nation still subscribes.

To mark the tenth anniversary of the new Commission, about a year ago a list of publication projects within the scope of its program was issued. The list described 24 underway and 8 in the planning stage for the publication of papers of individuals. They

[10] "Remarks of the President at the Luncheon in Observance of the Publication of the Diary and Autobiography of John Adams," White House press release, Oct. 3, 1961, p. 2.

[11] Committee on House Administration (Subcommittee on Enrolled Bills and Library), 85th Cong., 1st sess., *Hearings*, June 5, 1957, on H. J. Res. 233, p. 14.

include projects for the publication of the papers of Benjamin Franklin, of which 3 of a projected 40 volumes have been published; John Adams, whose diary and autobiography were published in 4 volumes about 2 weeks ago; Alexander Hamilton, with the first 2 of possibly 18 announced for publication next month; James Madison, with the first of some 30 volumes or more scheduled for publication in 1962; John Jay, John Dickinson, Francis Asbury, John Carroll, and Henry Laurens—all men who lived in the period of the Founding Fathers—the period which President Kennedy, at the *Adams Papers* ceremony, characterized as that "extraordinary golden age in our history." For later years of our Nation's history there are projects for the publication of the papers of John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, Henry R. Schoolcraft, James K. Polk, Rear Adm. Samuel Francis du Pont and other members of the Du Pont family, Charles Francis Adams, Andrew Johnson, Rutherford B. Hayes, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Government projects with which the Commission is cooperating include publication of the naval-maritime records of the American Revolution; papers relating to the ratification of the Constitution of the United States; the debates of the First Congress, 1789–91, and papers relating to that Congress; and the *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, which already covers the presidencies of Dwight D. Eisenhower and Harry S. Truman.[12]

The Commission does not, of course, "take credit" for all these projects. It does not undertake to supervise or direct them, but it does its best, as instructed by law, to "cooperate with and encourage" them, and the office of its staff serves as a clearinghouse for information, advice, and other assistance. But each project is independently and separately sponsored and operated. The program has been made possible in large part through cooperation from many sources. One has been understanding faculties and administrators of universities and university presses willing to undertake unprecedentedly large and long-continuing projects. The pioneers in this field were of course the Princeton University administration and the Princeton University Press, soon to be followed by Yale University and its press, and by the Harvard University Press. Invaluable cooperation has also come from helpful and knowledge-

[12] National Historical Publications Commission, *Tenth Anniversary; Luncheon Conference for Editors, December 29, 1960 . . . New York City* (Washington, 1960. 21 p., processed). Among the projects being planned but not yet underway are those for the publication of papers of Benjamin H. Latrobe, John Marshall, George Mason, and Daniel Webster.

able curators of archives and manuscripts, generous State legislatures, foundations (such as the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Lilly Endowment, Inc.), and other patrons (such as the New York Times Co.; Time, Inc.; the American Philosophical Society), to say nothing of the U. S. Congress, which appropriates money for the Commission's staff. It is interesting to note how much of the pattern suggested by the Continental Congress in its support of Hazard's project has been followed, both by Congress in the Federal Records Act of 1950 and the resolution of 1957 and by the Commission itself in the development of its program. Cooperation—by the States, by private agencies, by individuals, and by the United States Government—has been the keyword.

Here and there an isolated voice has said that microfilm rather than costly letterpress editions of personal papers and archival materials is the answer to the scholar's need for ready access to source materials. Microfilm has its important role to play, and an increasingly important role, to be sure. The microfilm publications of the National Archives are a boon to many scholarly enterprises. First begun some 20 years ago, these publications now number 12,626 rolls and make available more than 8 million pages of official records of the United States Government, mostly unpublished, in the National Archives.[13] Notable among these is the microfilm edition of the Papers of the Continental Congress, which has recently been completed in 204 rolls. Of the greatest importance also is the microfilm edition of the Adams Papers, issued by the Massachusetts Historical Society; it contains the whole body of Adams family archives, while the letterpress edition will contain selected parts running *only* to some 80 or 100 volumes. And now in progress at the Library of Congress is the magnificently conceived microfilm publication of the papers of 23 Presidents of the United States that are in that Library. In the initiation of this project President Truman was of the greatest help, and details of how it has been planned and how it operates will be given us in a paper to be read tomorrow afternoon.[14] Though microfilm publication has already done much to make available to scholars copies of "authentic Documents tending to elucidate our History" and thus by multiplying copies to place the information in the originals,

[13] *List of National Archives Microfilm Publications, 1961* (National Archives, *Publication* no. 61-12).

[14] Fred Shelley, "The Presidential Papers Program of the Library of Congress," paper read at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Oct. 7, 1961. [This paper will be published in the *American Archivist* in due course.—ED.]

as Jefferson urged, "beyond the reach of accident," much more remains to be done and will be done.

But I cannot imagine that microfilm publication, however extensive it may be and however useful to scholars it undoubtedly is and will be, will take the place of well-edited and beautifully printed volumes of historical documents. For who wants to tote a roll of microfilm home for an evening's browsing before the fire? Or what scholar in his right mind—unless he is concerned with some matter that only a facsimile will resolve—would prefer to consult a film or xerox "blow-ups" rather than a printed edition that brings together materials from many institutions and collections and is enlivened and enlightened by competent editing? The day may come, of course—and Verner W. Clapp's Council on Library Resources will certainly hasten its coming, if it can—when microfilmed materials may quickly and very cheaply be printed electrostatically at little expense and assembled into a book as ordered. Then, however, it will become desirable and feasible to add editorial notes to materials before filming, so that they will, in truth, constitute publications.

At one stage in the planning for a national publication program a guide to editorial policy and procedure was thought to be essential, but I doubt now that it is. Readily available are the statements of editorial policies and procedures by the editors of the Jefferson, the Franklin, and the Adams papers, together with the helpful treatment of this subject in the Harvard *Guide* and in Clarence E. Carter's *Historical Editing.* In the last analysis, however, each editor must make his own fundamental decisions and take the responsibility for them, and the editors whom I know would not want it any other way. But each newly named editor must make his pilgrimage to Princeton, where, as Henry Commager recently remarked, Julian Boyd conducts the American École des Chartes.[15]

The best and only guarantee of editorial excellence is to select an editor of the highest caliber. Those who make the selection must always guard against the selfseeking and the second-rate. They have this responsibility not only to the scholarly community but to the public.

The midtwentieth-century historical editors have raised the profession to a new standing, to unprecedented heights. The scholar-editor was, in fact, recently described by a thoughtful but some-

[15] At this point in the reading of his paper Dr. Hamer interpolated: "That Boyd again! I cannot refrain from saying to you about him, as John Adams said about Hazard: *He* is 'a genius!' "—ED.

what disquieted humanist as "the emerging ideal type among professional 'Americanists' "—"the type we encourage and reward beyond all others." He seemed to feel that this recognition and support are at the expense of interpretive writers.[16] Far from it, I would say. Documentary publication opens up rich veins for others to mine. The source materials it uncovers can be used for monographs, for syntheses, for textbooks, for biography, and so on, in a continuous spreading-out process.

The new scholar-editor is, or becomes, a specialist, but he must also be a generalist if he is to rise above the level of his predecessors. It is just as important for the editor to strive for this fusion as it is for the biographer or the historian, and he *must* achieve a measure of it in order to make discoveries and draw generalizations from them that are beyond the capacity of either the specialist or the generalist separately. The role of the new scholar-editor is not just to "provide elaborate notes illuminating obscure references."[17] It is to advance the understanding of a man and his times and by this interpretation of the man in his setting to throw light on the world we have inherited from him.

The first-rate editor must be painstakingly careful but also imaginative and broad of learning. He must have a talent for interpretation. He must have the humanity of a biographer, the flashing insight of a poet, the dedication of a teacher, tolerance for difference of opinion but intolerance of anything shoddy in scholarship. He must be indifferent to, or at least resigned to, small financial rewards.

The editors I know are generous with their time and knowledge. They are cooperative, always eager to forward to another project a copy of a document or a bit of information to throw light on a troublesome point. Yet they must have a rare independence of spirit. It is true that an editor sometimes has assistant editors, constituting a group, such as the "Princeton enterprise," the "Franklin factory," and the "Adams shop"—as they are sometimes called. The controls that they have had to institute over the vast amounts of material with which they deal do suggest the corporate approach, but anyone who knows these editors would never call them "bureaucratic," as one recent and misguided critic has done.

The present-day editor of personal papers is among the least academic of historians. He cannot take refuge, even if he would, in the rarefied consideration of isolated issues or events. Every day his nose is rubbed in the facts of living. He sees, through the

[16] Leo Marx, "The American Scholar Today," in *Commentary*, July 1961, p. 49.
[17] Marx, in *Commentary*, July 1961, p. 51.

papers he edits, ambition and avarice, selfsacrifice and idealism, sadness and suffering, hope and joy, success and failure, the transient and the long-enduring. And through it all he maintains his faith in the value, not only for scholarship but for society, of the work he is doing.

The editors of the publication projects in the NHPC program are doing more than furnish the raw materials of history. They are furnishing "authentic Documents tending to elucidate our History"—the source materials for an endless procession of scholars, materials not filtered or colored but illuminated by the knowledge and perception of the editors. They are doing it with a thoroughness and a completeness that, I am confident, will make it unnecessary for it to be done over again, as our history must be rewritten in the light of each new generation's interpretation. To the extent that the NHPC's effort "to seed our national consciousness with historical fact"[18] has been a success, it is due to the wholehearted cooperation of you curators of archives and manuscripts, the support of the university presses, the generosity of the patrons, and the vision of the members of the Commission, but—most of all—it is due to this new breed of editors, who are willing to dedicate their lives completely to the service of scholarship in the interest of the Nation and the world.

[18] David L. Norton, "The Elders of Our Tribe," in the *Nation*, Feb. 18, 1961, p. 148.

It Has Too Frequently Happened

Could not some plan be devised by which state or local historical societies, or state departments of archives and history, would plan their work regularly with a view of aiding teachers and advanced students of American history either in collecting or in publishing? It has too frequently happened that there has not been sufficient contact and cooperation between our institutions of learning and the state or local historical societies. Though occasionally the college instructor consults important documents of the society to aid him in his seminar work, there is no close relation which should exist between the chair of history and the society.

— James Morton Callahan, "The Study of Local History," in Callahan (ed.), *Semi-Centennial History of West Virginia*, p. 574 ([Charleston, W. Va.], 1913).