

The Scholar and Documentary Publication

By JAMES C. OLSON*

University of Nebraska

MA Y I begin by bringing greetings and best wishes from the American Association for State and Local History. I recall with much pleasure the joint meeting that our two organizations held in Raleigh in 1963. One of the highlights of that meeting, insofar as the association I represent is concerned, was the inauguration of its program of distinguished service awards. The fact that the first two awards were given to Ernst Posner and Christopher Crittenden attests to the importance that the AASLH, despite its well-advertised penchant for promotional hoop-la, attaches to the serious work of the archivist. Philip M. Hamer, recently president of the Society of American Archivists, signed our association's original charter of incorporation; David Duniway, our first secretary-treasurer, is a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists. Attesting further to the bond of common purpose between our two organizations is the fact that when our association last year found itself in need of a new professional director, it chose for the position a practicing archivist and Fellow of the Society of American Archivists, William T. Alderson. I trust that our two organizations will continue to work together for the common good.

I must say, however, that I view my responsibilities today with considerable apprehension. One small voice can hardly hope to speak for the scholarly community of this country or even for that segment of it represented by his own discipline. Indeed, I should say that historians, of all those who practice scholarly professions, are among the most individualistic. By virtue of the action of your program committee, you must be content with listening to one professor who speaks for no one but himself.

Having said this, I would hazard the guess that there are a few propositions that most historians would probably accept. I shall mention five.

*The author, president of the American Association for State and Local History, 1962-64, is Martin Professor and chairman of the department of history at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebr. This paper was read before the Society of American Archivists on Oct. 8, 1964, at Austin, Tex., as part of a session on the selection of source documents for publication.

The first is that documents have absolute primacy as source materials. I shall not belabor this point even though I am aware that historians are frequently admonished against too great dependence upon documents and are urged to write from experience rather than from the dead records of a dead past. To be sure, documents are sometimes liars, as T. E. Lawrence charged,¹ and even those that tell the truth are not the sole source of history. But they remain the primary source. History written without documents, despite the philosophical insight and literary skill of the historian, is assuredly—to quote the poet Karl Shapiro—“something invented by the history department.”²

The second proposition is that the duplication of documents is of the utmost importance. As Thomas Jefferson said so well in his oft-quoted letter to Ebenezer Hazard, we should save the documents of our history, “not by vaults and locks which fence them from the public eye and use, in consigning them to the waste of time, but by such a multiplication of copies, as shall place them beyond the reach of accident.”³ Fortunately for scholarship, this advice has been widely heeded although there still remain a few historical societies and other depositories whose boards of trustees and administrative officers operate under the misguided assumption that to microfilm or otherwise multiply the copies of their documentary treasures will somehow detract from their value and the prestige of their institutions. Happily, the number of such misers is declining.

A third proposition, which follows naturally from the second, is that in the multiplying of copies there must be the strictest sort of editorial integrity. Here again there is no need to belabor the point. Nor is there need to enter into the question that so exercised certain members of the House of Representatives when that body was considering H.R. 6237—the question whether the Government should provide funds for “compiling” rather than “editing.”⁴

This is not to suggest, of course, that there are no differences of opinion regarding editorial practices, because there are. There is considerable disagreement on the value of editorial annotations; there is greater disagreement on the value of reproducing complete

¹ David Garnett, ed., *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, p. 559 (New York, 1939), as quoted in Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher*, p. 48–49 (New York, 1957).

² Karl Shapiro, *The Bourgeois Poet*, p. 45 (New York, 1962).

³ Thomas Jefferson to Ebenezer Hazard, Feb. 18, 1791; extract in *American Archivist*, 23:55 (Jan. 1960).

⁴ *Congressional Record*, 109:18573–18593 (Oct. 15, 1963).

collections. These differences are sharply pointed up in Leonard Levy's review of *The Papers of James Madison* (volume 3), which appears in the September issue of the *Journal of American History* (the new name for the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*). "I wonder," Levy asks, "what purpose is served by the publication of Madison's papers on so huge a scale as this, with such fantastically detailed annotations whose total wordage probably exceeds that of the documents themselves." He concludes: ". . . the editors have plunged headlong into making the profession of editing look purely pedantic. Volume III sometimes seems intended as a satire on the now flourishing industry of editing the papers of our great statesmen."⁵ This review should and probably will produce vigorous discussion, which, if the reviewer's overcolorful language can be toned down, may illuminate this admittedly gray area. I should say that my own preference is for complete reproduction and extensive annotation.

My fourth proposition is that scholarly editing is important. Leonard Labaree put it well when he said in *Ventures*, the publication of the Yale Graduate School, that "what some scholars used to refer to slightly as 'mere editing' (in contrast to the treatises, monographs, and solid articles they were publishing themselves) has become one of the major forms of scholarly activity, especially in history and literature."⁶

My fifth and last proposition—one on which I am sure there is general agreement—is that the scholarly community is deeply indebted to institutions and governmental agencies that have devoted time, energy, and funds to the multiplication of the documents under their jurisdiction: historical societies, archival agencies, university presses, foundations, and the Federal Government. Speaking directly of historical societies, with which I am most familiar, I would say that it is unfortunate that in recent years many societies as they have broadened their activities—particularly in the area of public education—have reduced their efforts in documentary publication. Footnote and bibliographical references in countless works attest to the value of the documentary collections issued in the past by many historical societies. Indeed, they are still being used while many more recent "popular" publications are already forgotten. I do not agree with much that Walter Whitehill says in *Independent Historical Societies*, but I applaud his insistence that

⁵ *Journal of American History*, 51:299–301 (Sept. 1964).

⁶ Leonard W. Labaree, "Scholarly Editing in Our Times," in *Ventures*, 3:28 (Winter 1964).

documentary reproduction must remain a major function of historical societies if they are to continue to fulfill their unique mission in our civilization.⁷

Now, what shall be done? I might say that there should be an expansion of all programs now underway and the development of new ones—and let it go at that. I shall try to be a bit more specific.

Of the utmost importance, it seems to me, is the further development of cooperative enterprises. In the National Historical Publications Commission we have the machinery for cooperation, and happily, with the enactment of Public Law 88-383 by Congress and the appropriation of implementing funds, that machinery can begin to function in a way hitherto impossible. We have long lamented the lack of public support for the humanities and the social sciences. The funds available to the National Historical Publications Commission are miniscule when compared with the vast sums appropriated for the sciences, but they represent a significant breakthrough and if wisely used—as I am sure they will be—can be of inestimable service to scholarship throughout the country. It behooves scholars everywhere to cooperate to the full with this program.

The National Historical Publications Commission will and should be the driving force behind the collection and publication of documents, but it would be unfortunate if local and regional efforts outside the scope of the Commission's program should dry up. Rather, they should be stimulated. The papers recommended for publication by the Commission in its report of 1954—recommendations that were reaffirmed by Oliver W. Holmes in the hearings on H.R. 6237—are all eminently suitable, and if they could all be published would add immeasurably to the resources available for the study of American life.

Because men create history, the papers of individuals will always be primary sources of the greatest importance, and publication of such papers will always be of paramount concern. Yet there are criteria for publication other than individual fame. The National Historical Publications Commission has recognized this in its emphasis on the publication of documents relating to the ratification of the Constitution and the work of the first Federal Congress. The microfilm publication of early State records, sponsored by the Library of Congress, is an excellent example of what can be accomplished when careful scholarship and diligent legwork are combined

⁷ Walter Muir Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies*, p. 564-574 (Boston, 1962).

to bring together widely scattered papers that relate to a subject rather than to an individual. Likewise, *The Territorial Papers of the United States* represents a similarly valuable and imaginative achievement. (Parenthetically, I should like to express the hope that some means will be found to continue this valuable series until papers relating to all Territories have been published.)

More such publication programs are needed. We have only begun to exploit the possibilities of subject-related documentary publication. As we seek to exploit them further, we should continuously explore the possibilities of utilizing modern technology as an aid to publication. The data-recovery projects being undertaken by the Inter-University Consortium for Political Research, for instance, seem to me to represent a particularly fruitful application of advanced technology to what might well be considered as a form of documentary duplication if not publication. Among other types of data being collected and tabulated by the Consortium at Ann Arbor are county election statistics for the years 1824 to the present.

There is much visionary and some irresponsible talk about the possibility of reducing the contents of our libraries and archives to microfilm and tape and of replacing the book with the print-out, but this should not deter us from imaginative thought of the highest order in applying the computer—and other relevant technical apparatus—to documentary duplication and to research techniques in general. We must look to the archivists rather than to the academic scholars for this thinking because the latter are equipped neither by training nor predilection to undertake it.

I can add little to what has been said on the subject of letterpress and microfilm publication. In common, I suppose, with virtually all researchers I would always choose a well-annotated letterpress publication over microfilm; but until funds available for documentary reproduction are much greater I would hope that those responsible for their expenditure will choose quantity microfilming over quality annotation and publication.

Documentary publication serves needs other than those of the researcher, and certain documents or collections of documents have historical, cultural, literary, or patriotic values that lift them far above the status of raw material for the scholar. The Adams papers provide a good illustration of this type of material and also of wisdom in publication. Very properly the complete collection was put on microfilm, selections are being published in hard covers, and still another edition is coming out in paperback. As Dr. Whitehill

suggests, "The 608 reels of microfilm, now available to scholars in more than forty libraries, are all the publication likely to be required of John Quincy Adams's epic poems, his metrical translations of the Psalms, and his addresses to small-town fire departments."⁸

For the scholar, however, the important fact about the Adams papers is that the complete collection is on microfilm; the scholar *qua* scholar is interested in documentary duplication primarily as a means of bringing the research library to his own study. If possible, he would like to have the aids to the use of the material that would be available to him in the depository library, and he really expects nothing more. If the film has brought together related materials from widely scattered depositories, so much the better. As for the film itself, the scholar expects good quality reproduction with adequate internal organization; he is more than grateful when notes describing contents are also furnished—not on the film itself but in an accompanying pamphlet.

If I may be pardoned a personal example, I have recently received in my study in the University of Nebraska Library the 58 rolls of National Archives film which comprise E. S. Gorrell's documentary history of the Air Service in World War I. My particular purposes do not require a reading of all 58 rolls. The original typescript in the National Archives has a detailed table of contents that is reproduced on roll 1 of the film; as a matter of fact, it occupies about a third of the roll. I am glad to have the table of contents, but how much better it would be to have it in a pamphlet rather than on the film! In the absence of a pamphlet, I seem to have only two alternatives: (1) to keep the contents roll on a separate reader, or (2) to prepare a microprint of the roll. I hardly have room for two readers in my study (even if I could persuade the library to provide them), and microprinting is relatively expensive. I can understand why the National Archives cannot provide pamphlets with all its film, and if a choice must be made between reducing the filming program or eliminating pamphlets, I would urge the latter. I hope, however, that some day it will be possible for the National Archives to maintain its filming program—which, in my judgment, is one of the greatest boons to scholarship the country has seen—and still provide explanatory pamphlets.

Whatever means are used and whatever techniques are developed, the need for still more documentary duplication is great and steadily grows greater. Confining our discussion to the field of history, the increasing demand for college teachers and better pre-

⁸ Whitehill, p. 573.

pared secondary school teachers is resulting in rapidly increasing graduate enrollments. Institutions with limited library resources are undertaking to train Ph. D's., and even in the best equipped institutions the doctoral candidate frequently has to work with papers not available locally. Graduate students are much better financed than they were a generation or even a decade ago, but travel costs remain relatively prohibitive in both money and time. The duplication of documents is as important as any single factor in increasing the Ph. D.-producing potential of the country and in furthering the research interests of our faculties.

In short, it is difficult to think of anything that would do more to further scholarship in history than a vastly expanded, well-managed program of documentary publication. We seem to be on the verge of establishing such a program. The scholars of the country look to the archivists for leadership in this important enterprise.

The Department of History and the Graduate School of Librarianship
of the

UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

in cooperation with the

COLORADO STATE ARCHIVES

presents its 1965

**Archival Institute Covering the History, Theory, and Practice of
Archival Administration and Related Fields of Private Papers
and Manuscripts**

July 25–August 20, 1965

Director: Dolores C. Renze, State Archivist of Colorado

Codirector: Leon deValinger, Jr., State Archivist of Delaware and Director
of Delaware State Museum

Associate

Directors: Allen D. Breck, Chairman of the Department of History
Stuart Baille, Director of the Graduate School of Librarianship

**For information write to University of Denver Archives Institute,
Department of History, or Graduate School of Librarianship—
Attn.: D. C. Renze, Denver, Colorado 80210**