

The Choice of a Medium for Documentary Publication

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LONG ago Jeremy Belknap wrote to Ebenezer Hazard about the embryo Massachusetts Historical Society, saying "We intend to be an *active*, not a passive, Literary body; not to lie waiting, like a bed of oysters, for the tide (of communication) to flow in upon us, but to *seek* and *find*, to *preserve* and *communicate* literary intelligence, especially in the historical way."¹ And publish the society has ever since: at first by pamphlets and by "numbers" that could later be bound into volumes, then by full volumes, in the 1920's in a series called "Photostat Americana," later by offset, and now by microfilm—in addition to conventional letterpress printing.

What counted in 1791 for the founder of that venerable society and what counts today for its enlightened leadership is the intelligent communication of what has been sought and found and preserved. The form by which the historical resources are communicated is less important than the fact that communication takes place. I have not been able to discover that there were serious objections when handset type was replaced by linotype or when improvements of other sorts have been introduced. My research has not really been exhaustive on this point or on another equally important one: the battle for the retention of the quill pen when the steel pen came along or when that was replaced by the typewriter. One can in fact confidently predict that, if new and better forms of communication are available in the next century, that liveliest of ancient historical societies, which Jeremy Belknap set in motion, will use these forms in addition to those of today.

All of this is to say that the function, not the means, is what matters most. If buggy manufacturers had recognized that they were in the business of building vehicles for transportation, they would have shifted gradually to the manufacture of automobiles. And by the same token perhaps makers of quill pens would now be producing ballpoint pens.

Documentary publication of historical sources has after all one primary purpose: to bring together a scholar and a transcript or a reproduction of a document. One of the best ways to achieve this purpose is to print transcripts of selections of the papers—of Jefferson Davis, for instance—in beautiful volumes.

The author is a member of the staff of the National Historical Publications Commission with special responsibilities for microfilm publication. He read this paper on Oct. 1, 1968, at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Ottawa, Canada.

¹ Feb. 19, 1791, in Massachusetts Historical Society, *Collections*, 5th series, 3:245.

Most of you have been alert to the increasing use of the terms selection and selections. Some of you are already objecting: but *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* are to be complete and so are the papers of Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison. This is certainly true, and I for one am very glad that it is. With you and others I may feel occasionally concerned about the rate of progress in some of these enterprises and about prospects for their eventual completion. But no matter; I am glad that these enterprises have been undertaken and are underway. The papers handled comprehensively, however, are relatively small bodies of documentation. Comprehensive letterpress publication of large bodies of documents is not now being and is not likely to be undertaken. The intermediate ground is a selective letterpress edition.

The factor of selectivity can perhaps be overstressed. Most of us have a good deal of confidence in the judgment of Edwin Hemphill, Charles Wiltse, LeRoy Graf, John Simon, and other editors who make the decisions. Given the costs in staff time and the expense of publication, selectivity is unavoidable for most figures whose papers are being or are to be published. The needs of most users of the printed volumes are best served in this way. He who doubts the truth of this statement should read what Editor Hemphill wrote in the introduction to his third volume or should consider the mass of official documentation that crossed Davis's desk in his 4 years as Secretary of War in the 1850's.² How much greater is the problem with 20th-century documentation! But selection, however necessary, does mean that part of the documentation is withheld.

Microfilm publication traces its origins to efforts beginning three decades ago to find an economical means of supplying copies of masses of documents needed by students and scholars. The values of reproducing historical documents in the form in which they were written was perhaps less evident at first than later. Something of the flavor of the document and the times comes through in a faithful reproduction that a linotype machine cannot convey. Letterpress editors often use photographs of documents as illustrations, and this must be one of their reasons for doing so. Librarians who must shelve materials, however, appreciate the economy in space almost as much as the lower cost of a roll of microfilm. Archivists and librarians certainly agree on the value of microfilm publication as an extension of reference service and are generally happy when the use of microfilm spares hard use of fragile originals.

Let us review quite briefly some of the special characteristics of microfilm and also the essentials in an acceptable microfilm publication. In the first place microfilm publication involves more than a simple hap-

² W. Edwin Hemphill, ed., *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*, 3:vii-xii (Charleston, S.C., 1967).

hazard filming of a few documents for the use of a single scholar. This kind of filming we can call "note-taking" filming: a scholar or his university pays for the filming of a number of documents with the result that the intellectual process of studying the manuscripts, selecting excerpts to be used in an article or a book—in short, the whole process of note-taking—is postponed to a later time.

A roll of microfilm is different from a book in a number of significant ways. One cannot pick it up, as a booklover will, and feel its heft or page through it or look at the illustrations, the preface, and the index. The film is inscrutable. One roll in a box is like any other roll in another box, though occasionally one can find attractive box labels. A roll of film is like a scroll in that one must read or at least crank through it from one end to the other and back again. The spools in a roll are like the rods in a scroll, but one must have a reading device to enlarge the thousand or more tiny images that are on the hundred-foot strip of film.³

The user of this modern miniature scroll is entitled to more help for the very reason of its form and the relative rigidity imposed by the form. The manuscripts and records reproduced must be carefully and logically arranged, and the filming itself must meet standards of technical excellence. A descriptive pamphlet guide that will lead a user through the whole complex publication as well as provide detailed help is indispensably necessary.

But, some say, why put up with the inconvenience of microfilm when one can use a fine printed book? The answer is, as Wayne Grover has pointed out, that the choice is often not between a microfilm and a book but between a microfilm and nothing.⁴ If you are willing to agree that what has been said to this point is true, how shall decisions be reached as to which form shall be used?

1. Comprehensive editions are to be justified by the importance of the man and the importance of his papers. One can suppose that nothing less than a comprehensive edition of the papers of George Washington will be issued by the University of Virginia. Few, if any, however, will criticize the project at Princeton which is publishing a generous selection, but a selection still, of the papers of Woodrow Wilson.⁵ When little documentation survives for an important figure such as George Mason, one must suppose that everything should be printed. But who could expect or want a comprehensive edition of William Howard Taft's papers? More than 500 rolls of microfilm will be required to film the natural accumulation of his papers in the Library of Congress. Even if no copies of other Taft letters were sought elsewhere, several hundred volumes would be needed to print this large collection.

³ See Sam Kula, "The Preparation of Finding Aids for Manuscript Material on Microfilm," in *Canadian Archivist Newsletter*, I, no. 2:3-10 (1964), and Edith G. Firth, "The Editing and Publishing of Documents," *ibid.*, I, no. 1:12 (1963).

⁴ Wayne C. Grover, "Toward Equal Opportunities for Scholarship," in *Journal of American History*, 52:715-724 (Mar. 1966).

⁵ Arthur S. Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 1:xiv-xv (Princeton, 1966).

2. Selective editions of the papers of such major figures as John C. Calhoun, Henry Clay, Jefferson Davis, Andrew Johnson, Ulysses S. Grant, and Woodrow Wilson seem essential and desirable. Reference has already been made to the problem of quantity in the Calhoun papers.

For another example consider the Grant papers: in some instances as many as nine versions of an order or report are found in the microfilm edition published by the Library of Congress.⁶ But not even one version of every order or report over Grant's signature during the 4 years of a great war needs to appear in print.

3. The preparation of a comprehensive microfilm publication, as with Dartmouth College's Daniel Webster papers project, to be followed by a selective letterpress edition is—in the opinion of the writer—a solution very close to ideal. Virtually everything will be available on the microfilm, and the volumes to be edited by Charles M. Wiltse will reflect his mature judgment of the documents significant enough to justify more expensive letterpress form.

A variation of this method is that being used by Nathan Reingold of the Smithsonian Institution. The Joseph Henry papers are being gathered, more than a score of selective letterpress volumes will be printed, and part way through the printing (or when the collecting task is virtually completed) a comprehensive microfilm publication will reproduce all the documents. The arrangement of the Henry papers on the film will be by provenance rather than in chronological order, as will be the case with the Webster papers.

There are two other microfilm projects of this sort that may result later in selective letterpress enterprises: New York University's Albert Gallatin papers project and the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society's Millard Fillmore papers project.

4. Microfilm publication alone will serve most needs of most users of the papers of Ignatius Donnelly and Henry C. Warmoth, David Starr Jordan and Joseph L. Bristow, J. Sterling Morton and Timothy Pickering, Claude Kitchin and Robert M. T. Hunter. This is not to suggest that some letters and documents in these and similar papers will not be published or quoted extensively. Extended letterpress publication is not to be expected in most instances, however.

Those interested in other microfilm publications in a program stimulated by the National Historical Publications Commission can consult the Commission's *Catalog of Microfilm Publications* (1968).

Is this all? No, it is not. Since 1941 the National Archives has published long and important runs of official documents on microfilm. At a recent count more than 1,300 separate publications on some 100,000 rolls of film had been made available for purchase at modest charges. This magnificent publication program (it is hardly known to most scholars in the United States) is a self-supporting operation which has gone a long way toward providing equal opportunities for scholarship. It is a continuing program, with new titles and hundreds of rolls added each year.⁷

Consider for a moment one recent publication in the National Archives program: the letters and applications for office during the administra-

⁶ Library of Congress, *Index to Ulysses S. Grant Papers*, vi (Washington, 1965).

⁷ The most recent catalog is the *List of National Archives Microfilm Publications 1968* (Washington, 1968).

tions of Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson.⁸ These documents run a full gamut from trivial and self-serving letters to quite significant documents. Collectively they tell us much about the drain on the time and energies of two Presidents in filling minor as well as more important offices. One specific use recently came to our attention: the University of North Dakota is concerned right now with records of Dakota Territory and naturally was much interested to find 17 letters concerning Territorial Governor Andrew J. Faulk reproduced on one of the 53 rolls in this particular publication.

Few, I assume, would hold that this mass of documentation should appear in letterpress or would force either user or staff to search out items of particular interest and pertinence and then ask that a special note-taking film be prepared for one user. There are many uses to be made of the files of letters and applications for Presidents, from John Adams onward through William McKinley. Many of these files for the Presidential administrations, through that of President Andrew Johnson, are available on film.⁹

There are still other microfilm publication programs. A notable one is the Presidential Papers Program of the Library of Congress.¹⁰ The Massachusetts Historical Society is pursuing vigorously, though on a modest scale, a program of its own, in addition to participating in the NHPC program.¹¹ There are a number of other programs, many smaller, some just beginning, others still in planning stages.

It is worth noting that between letterpress and microfilm there may be a middle level of publication, if we have the wit to recognize it. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania has recently brought to the attention of its members and friends a photographic reproduction in volume form of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 1728–89. Newspaper pages were small in those days, but the volumes of reproductions are still a little larger than standard sized books. There is considerable advantage, however, in using a photoreproduction without the need of a microfilm reader. Who will be the first to try publication of manuscript and archival documents by this method?¹²

It has been interesting to learn something of what our Canadian colleagues are doing in the field of microfilm publication. They are doing more than most of us know, for we from the United States con-

⁸ Microcopy No. 650, with a 137-page pamphlet guide.

⁹ Files for John Adams' administration are on 3 rolls, Thomas Jefferson's on 12 rolls, James Madison's on 8 rolls, James Monroe's on 19 rolls, John Quincy Adams' on 8 rolls, Andrew Jackson's on 27 rolls, Abraham Lincoln's and Andrew Johnson's on 53 rolls. The file for George Washington forms Series 7 of the Washington papers at the Library of Congress and has been filmed on rolls 119–124 of its microfilm publication of those papers.

¹⁰ See Fred Shelley, "The Presidential Papers Program of the Library of Congress," in *American Archivist*, 25:429–433 (Jan. 1962).

¹¹ "Publications: New and Forthcoming," in *MHS Miscellany*, 6–8 (Apr. 1968).

¹² The alert reader will recognize this method as an improved and economical version of Benjamin Franklin Stevens' facsimile publication work during the 19th century.

tinue to be inexcusably ignorant of many things north of the border. All census records in the Public Archives of Canada to and including 1871 have been filmed and are available for purchase or interlibrary loan. There are many other negatives of which positive prints may be purchased, though the initial purpose for microfilming was security, reduction of wear and tear on original documents, and a wish to make sources widely available by means of film loans.

The first real microfilm publication of the Public Archives of Canada should be available soon. The first of a series of volumes of the letters of Sir John Macdonald, Canada's first Prime Minister, was published in 1968. A selection of Sir John's letters will be printed, but a list of all letters traced will appear as an appendix in the printed volume. All letters, whether printed or not, will be published on microfilm.¹³

What really counts, whether one deals with Canadian or United States documents, is that document and user be brought together. When the utility, interest, and demand are great and when funds are available, a comprehensive letterpress edition is the right method. If the documentation is enormous and if interest is not universally high for every single item in this mass of material, a selective letterpress edition is the proper choice. On some occasions a comprehensive microfilm publication and a selective letterpress edition are in order. And quite often a well done microfilm publication will best serve the needs of users. If we are agreed on all this, we have only to decide which papers fit into which category. Answers to these questions are not available by measurement against a fixed frame of reference, or by slide rule, or by any other mechanical device. Common sense, careful study, mature professional judgment, and a decent respect for fiscal realities are the criteria needed. There is no way to avoid cerebral exercises and activity. This is seldom easy, but the reward is the satisfaction of knowing that documents (in whatever the form of publication) and the scholar user are brought together. That, after all, is what the business of documentary publication is all about. And I rather think that those early practitioners of documentary publication would rejoice to know the variety and scale of today's documentary publication. If they could know what we are doing, they would be cheering us on right now.

¹³ W. Kaye Lamb, Dominion Archivist, to Fred Shelley, July 5, 1968.

