True Valor Seen: Historical Editing

By PAUL H. BERGERON

OURS IS a generation of editors. Anyone in the historical profession today knows that editors, associate editors, assistant editors, editorial assistants, and others are numerous, and historians are generally becoming more tolerant and appreciative of the labors of this group of Clio's servants. Curiously, little is being done among students of history at either the undergraduate or the graduate levels to stimulate and encourage historical editing as a legitimate concern of the profession. Only occasional efforts are made to breach the wall of prejudice that separates historians and editors.[1] Part of the difficulty, despite the impressive accomplishments of the current group of editors, is that historians convey the impression to their students that historical editing is not for them, but for the less able. After several years' experience, I am convinced that editing is only for the competent and the stouthearted. Here the words of John Bunyan seem relevant: "Who would true valour see, let him come hither."

The prospective young editor must be a person with an abiding affection and respect for historical records and with 20/20 vision for the potential history in a single document. In a romantic sort of way his appreciation must be such that he believes the more intimately acquainted he becomes with the records, the more likely he will be able to *touch* history. Admittedly, few of us completely measure up to these ideals, but if we did not possess at least some

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1 During the past several years a number of articles on historical editing have appeared in professional journals. I particularly recommend: L. H. Butterfield, "Editing American Historical Documents," in Massachusetts Historical Society *Proceedings*, 78:81–104 (1966); Lester J. Cappon, "A Rationale for Historical Editing: Past and Present," in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 23:56–75 (Jan. 1966); and Haskell Monroe, "Some Thoughts for an Aspiring Historical Editor," in *American Archivist*, 32:147–159 (Apr. 1969). Dr. Butterfield, Professor Cappon, and I make certain observations about historical editing that are closely parallel; nevertheless, our approaches and coverage are different. Professor Monroe's essay reports on historical editing and lists the 38 editorial projects currently under the auspices of the National Historical Publications Commission.

of the characteristics and a sense of humor, I fear we would too easily tire of our tedious labors. Although there are many ways to describe or define the historical editor's tasks, for purposes of organization and clarity I will arbitrarily separate them into two general categories: the historian as editor and the editor as historian.

Foremost among the tasks of the historian as editor is the responsibility of searching for manuscripts. Frequently this is a deceptively easy assignment. If the Library of Congress, for example, has preserved the letters of a prominent historical figure, the immediate temptation is to look no further. This would indeed be a regrettable mistake, for until the historian-editor has consulted certain guides to manuscript holdings, he cannot possibly know the riches that may await him in State and denominational libraries, historical societies, and private collections. The search for relevant materials should be limited only by the ingenuity of the editor and the pressure of time. It is a ceaseless chore and one full of surprises, as many editors can testify. The discovery in the spring of 1969 of some 10,000 Millard Fillmore letters was dramatic enough to merit front page attention in the *New York Times*.[2] This episode should remind all current and prospective editors that it is seldom wise to claim that one's searching has been completed and that the forthcoming publication will therefore be definitive. The quest for materials is thus both the beginning and the continuing task of the historian-editor.

Before much further progress can be made in the search, a second responsibility has to be met. The historian-editor must decide the nature and scope of the editorial project. The National Historical Publications Commission, historical experts, and historical editors may all combine to lend advice on this crucial matter. Certainly financial considerations are operative whenever one attempts to define the boundaries of his editorial work. Should the project give complete chronological coverage to the historical figure? Should *everything* written to and from this person be edited and published? Should certain legitimate restrictions be imposed, such as limiting the work to correspondence alone and thereby forsaking printed speeches and other papers? Satisfactory answers must be found for these demanding questions.

The next task of the historian-editor is to lay down editorial rules governing the work. It is almost impossible to overemphasize this important responsibility. Unless and until one has formulated and written the rules, the entire project will flounder in uncertainty

[2] *New York Times*, March 24, 1969.

and inconsistency. Though it is true that many of the regulations will be greatly adjusted and new rules will be made, it is still essential to have some framework at the outset. The historian-editor must decide whether facsimile reproduction or complete modernization and standardization will be followed; possibly he will choose some sort of "halfway covenant"—that is, a certain amount of standardization, but at the same time rigorous adherence to the spellings in the original materials. Once a general policy is decided on the specific details of regulations can more readily be formulated. The rules should deal with such matters as the problems of spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. Because of the peculiar circumstances of each project, guidelines of other projects are never entirely suitable. Though borrowing is not the complete answer, the prospective editor should consult policies delineated by successful editors. Much thought and reflection are needed to tailor the best set of rules for the work, and these rules must be formulated with precision and clarity. Perhaps the following words from the *Harvard Guide* can be helpful: "Accuracy without Pedantry. Consistency first, last, and always."[3]

After undertaking these first three assignments, the historian-editor is ready for the main task: a careful, exhaustive (and doubtless exhausting) reading of the original manuscripts. This heavy burden rests firmly on the shoulders of the editor and virtually no one else, though he may seek counsel and consolation from others. It is difficult enough to decipher all sorts of old handwritings, especially letters written by semiliterate individuals, but the troubles are frequently compounded by the deteriorating condition of the manuscripts. Some are torn, some are blotted, while others are faded.[4] The editor should carefully observe the peculiarities of writers' penmanship, because the authorship of unsigned letters might be determined by handwriting comparisons. Sometimes exacting and tedious hours will be spent trying to read a single paragraph in a poorly written or damaged letter. There are times when one has to admit defeat and go on to other concerns. Later, however, that unintelligible phrase or passage in the letter might be easily read and understood; this is surely one of the quirks of the editing business. Is there an editor who does not feel thrill and excitement when he finally emerges victorious over a particu-

[3] Oscar Handlin *et al., Harvard Guide to American History,* p. 104 (Cambridge, Mass., 1954).

[4] These problems have been somewhat minimized because of the attention given to manuscripts by persons who have had a sense of history and have wished to preserve its raw materials.

larly difficult document? Naturally, the more experience one has in the art of reading historical records, the less difficult the task.

To get the best possible rendering of the manuscripts the editor should refrain from imposing today's standards of language and spelling on those of another century. In editing the correspondence of James K. Polk, for example, the editor must put on his 19th-century spectacles. With this attitude and with the experience gained along the way, he is better able to meet the demands of producing a version that reflects scrupulous devotion to the original documents. The records of the past will remain muted, if not completely silent, unless some skillful historian-editor reveals their meaning through a critical, challenging, and correct reading.

At least two significant tasks confront the editor as historian. Somewhat imprecisely phrased, the first one is to exercise the critical powers and skeptical attitudes of the historian while functioning as an editor. The trained historian has already experienced the responsibility of confronting and challenging evidence; assuming such a skeptical attitude will naturally have value for the editor-historian. In a word, good editing requires doubt. The editor-historian must doubt everything in a document or letter—from the provenance and date to the closing signature. When examining a collection of letters that has been cataloged or chronologically arranged by the Library of Congress or some other depository, the editor-historian should avoid the common pitfall of assuming that someone else has already challenged the authenticity of the dates and authors of the letters. He will soon learn that sometimes he cannot even trust the date affixed to a letter by the person who wrote it. Naturally he must question the dates that have been supplied by some later source even more closely. I determined, for example, that a letter in the Polk papers is not an *1833* letter as suggested by the depository, but rather an *1844* letter![5] Who can argue that a difference of 11 years in dating a document is unimportant? The critical eye will readily discern that internal evidence in a letter frequently provides the necessary clues to help place it in its proper chronological slot. The editor-historian who is not well trained in the history of a given period is hopelessly lost when it comes to interpreting internal evidence and using it most effectively.[6] Though space does not permit further elaboration of the task of

[5] John P. Chester to Polk, [Nov. 7, 1833], in Polk papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. In editing Polk's correspondence I have often had to alter the dates of letters, either because the author was careless or because the depository miscalculated the dates.

[6] Butterfield, in Massachusetts Historical Society *Proceedings*, 78:101–102; Cappon, in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 23:73.

exercising doubt, any experienced editor-historian could more lengthily recite the problems associated with scrutinizing historical documents for accuracy; all prospective editors should be aware of the dangers involved. Certainly correspondence and other documents must be closely examined.

The second responsibility of the editor-historian is to illuminate the manuscript; comparing him to a medieval monk is not altogether farfetched. He must, by his annotations and explanatory notes, add color and interest to the material. The effective editor-historian illumines the meanings of obscure references and provides biographical data on both the famous and inconsequential names appearing in historical documents. It is this responsibility that compels him to develop an expertise in all kinds of pertinent materials —national, State, local, land, military, pension, and court records, to name a few. To be skilled in illuminating manuscripts, the editor-historian must constantly watch for bits and pieces of evidence that may unravel some mysterious reference in a particular letter or provide a missing link to some biographical or genealogical problem. He must become a walking catalog of names for he never knows when and where certain corroborating evidence may appear. Today's historical editing is known for its notable achievements in the area of illumination; much of the excitement and most of the hard work meet in this particular task. Historical sleuthing will yield a wealth of information, important and trivial, to the editor-historian with ingenuity and stamina.

After considering the weighty responsibilities of the historical editor, it is helpful to consider the accompanying rewards. Happily, the benefits are so numerous and varied that one cannot easily outline them with any degree of completeness. The following observations merely suggest some of the possible rewards. Obviously, the editor, and the historian as well, could not function with confidence were it not for the records of the past that have been preserved. These have been kept in amazingly good condition by a whole army of historically conscious people. Certainly one of the paramount rewards of the editor is a deepening appreciation for the "life preservers." Though errors in cataloging have been made from time to time, these can be forgiven because of the riches that have been saved. In the history of various collections of correspondence hardly a more inspiring testimony exists of our debt to librarians, archivists, collectors, and others.

A second reward for the editor is the acquisition of an in-depth knowledge of prominent historical figures. This is especially true if a man's papers relate to recognized leaders. The editor gains a

far better and deeper knowledge of certain individuals and more clearly understands the frailties and the strengths of past leaders. It is not unreasonable to expect the historical editor to become the leading expert on a significant person of the past. There is no adequate way to measure fully the benefits in this particular area.

Finally, the editor knows that his job is worth performing well when he begins to sense that he is achieving new insight into the humanness of history. Though this reward naturally flows from the second reward, it is distinctive enough to deserve special comment. After the industrious editor has been immersed in his work for many months, the letters and documents begin to speak to him. The voices of the great and the near great, as well as the obscure, are heard; these persons seem alive again. While reading their comments and observations about business, politics, religion, family, marriage, death, and even the weather, the sensitive editor becomes aware of historical figures as humans. When he reflects on the panorama of events and persons with which he is working, he sees that the great theme of his labors is human commonality, past and present. It is a great reward for the editor to arrive at this understanding; a more mature scholar is the result. The temptation, of course, is to become too romantic or sentimental about this special insight. The reasonable individual admits that there have been and will continue to be such strong forces as economics and nationalism at work, but the historical editor completes his responsibilities and tasks with the added assurance of the humanness of history.

In contemplating these responsibilities and rewards one will profit from the words of Lester J. Cappon: "If, then, we envisage the historical editor as historian—not as a narrow-minded purveyor of documents, but as a knowledgeable scholar concerned with the meaning of the sources at his command—he will not be detached from the mainstream of creative scholarship."[7] The call for laborers in the editing field is a never ceasing one; it is hoped that more and more eager, dedicated, and competent young historians will answer.

[7] Cappon, *ibid.*, p. 75.