

Reflections of an Unrepentant Editor

NATHAN REINGOLD

JULIAN BOYD WAS A GREAT CHARISMATIC FIGURE whose legacy is very much with us. That legacy became problematic during his lifetime. Ironically, as events made possible in part by Boyd produce new editing conceptions, in some quarters it is fashionable to deride his work. I think it safe to assert that Boyd's *Jefferson Papers* will be read for knowledge and pleasure long after we are all beyond caring for footnotes.

In addition to the work on the Jefferson documents, Boyd's legacy is a revitalized movement for use of documentary sources. Despite critics and despite genuine fiscal anxieties, historical documentary editing is flourishing. Perhaps some 70 projects are in existence, of which 50 prepare printed volumes. To date, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission reports that 314 volumes have appeared. The current production rate is between 12 and 15 volumes a year. In addition there are many ex-

amples of documentary editing from volumes to brief articles completely outside the Commission's program.

The Commission further estimates that these projects have attracted from seven to nine million dollars in support beyond its funds and those of the National Endowment for the Humanities. This last estimate is clearly on the low side. Whatever the true value, these are largely new funds that otherwise would not have gone to historical work. Historical editing is expanding in an era when alternatives to conventional academic employment are very much needed.¹ Less than two years ago, many documentary editors, not only historians, formed the Association for Documentary Editing with a membership now slightly below 300. (Let me also note for the record that microform publications, proclaimed by some as the alternative to printed volumes, are commonly also within the province of documentary editors.)

¹These words, written before the first Reagan budget, have a Pollyannaish ring now, but I am still optimistic, even if somewhat less bullishly.

The author is editor of the Joseph Henry Papers at the Smithsonian Institution. This paper is a slight revision of a talk given to the Joint Meeting of the Association of British Columbia Archivists and the Northwest Archivists in Victoria, B.C. on 24 April 1981.

In this paper I will discuss some current issues in documentary editing. First, I will sketch a general framework for history, placing editing within that overview. Second, I will consider some problems of completeness, accuracy of transcription, and annotation practices largely in terms of two late, great, but dissimilar editors: Julian Boyd, and Clarence Carter of the *Territorial Papers of the United States*. To conclude, I will briefly discuss possible emerging trends.

To paraphrase Sir Hilary Jenkinson, one can divide unpublished sources as being signals sent out, signals received, and signals created and maintained internally as a kind of data base. All historical work—from the labors of archivists and librarians to the effusions of authors of monographs and articles—consists of the processing of these signals, presumably to usefulness and meaningfulness. “Usefulness” and “meaningfulness” overlap considerably in this context. The ultimate purpose of the processing is dissemination of the information given by the signals. At each stage, from the labors of archivists to the research of historians, processing introduces the possibility of changes or of obscuring of the original signals to the point where the relation of a historian’s product to the original signals, literally or intellectually, is rather remote. Beyond that point, of course, there are the great historical novels like *War and Peace*. In this transformation of signals, historians can introduce viewpoints and concepts that imbue their products with an element of human art inevitably going beyond the literal denotation of the recorded signals.

The functions of archivists and historical editors are related and complementary. Archivists preserve the signals in a manner that one hopes will be accessible to users while eschewing any tampering with the original signals. This is the reason for the archivist’s con-

cern for the integrity of the fonds and with provenance. Archivists essentially avoid processing the signals (or minimizing that) in favor of analyzing the physical accumulations of the signals or sometimes describing or listing individual components of the accumulations. Historical editors present the preserved signals (characteristically in documents) in a form accessible to their contemporaries but in a manner that minimizes the extent of processing changes. Arguments about historical editing come down to differences over how to treat the marks on old papers to make them intelligible to wider audiences and how much of their own words (“signals”) editors have to or should add for the benefit of readers—that is, how far they should diverge from the preserved signals.

Rulers, religious leaders, and others in the past have felt impelled to preserve these signals in accessible forms, as on obelisks. In the last century in much of the Western world occurred an extraordinary rise in historical self-consciousness, resulting in increased concern for preservation, publication, and other uses of unpublished sources—not to mention the loving in-gathering of artifacts and the restoration of structures. Not accidentally, the rising historical self-consciousness occurred as nation after nation experienced that great transformation we call the Industrial Revolution and as the Western world, as a whole, complacently equated imperialistic hegemony with moral, racial, intellectual, and physical superiority. Publishing historical documents served two interrelated purposes. The first was to give an authentic record of the origins of imperium and nation-state. The second was to present posterity with indisputable evidence defining the essence of national identity in a sense we now associate with the Romantic movement. At one and the

same time a receding past was memorialized while confirming the greatness of the present and the future.

In the United States the result was an impressive tide of volumes sponsored by federal, state, and local governments; private historical societies; universities; and individual scholars. These volumes still have merit. But by later standards some were without clearly defined criteria for inclusion nor made known omissions public by such simple devices as calendars or lists. Many were flawed by a very limited hunt for sources. In addition to the occasional blatant bowdlerizing, a number of editions published before Boyd were given to modernizations or inconsistencies in transcription largely avoided by the present generation of historical editors. By the end of the century, the German historical tradition influenced major history departments in the United States to include editing as an integral part of training for the profession. By 1940, however, editing had lost its prominent place, although volumes of documents still appeared. When Harry Truman, a self-proclaimed Jefferson fan, reacted to Boyd's first volume by revitalizing the moribund National Historical Publications Commission, he was pointedly noting the importance of understanding origins and essences in a world filled with ideological and technological perils.

Technology made Boyd's *Jefferson* feasible. His edition would have all the Jefferson documentation. He could not depend on laborious hand transcripts in the manner of B. F. Stevens or Peter Force. As a new editor without money or staff in 1966, I made the rounds of my elders. When I visited Lyman Butterfield, originally Boyd's deputy and then the editor of the *Adams Papers*, he told me that the wartime V-Mail system had enabled Boyd to gather the sources. I remembered accounts of pigeons carrying

microfilmed mail out from Paris during the Franco-Prussian War. Butterfield proudly showed me how he and Boyd made multiple copies of index cards using snap-out forms. I remembered that James Watt invented letterpress copying, which kept Boulton and Watt solvent while their steam engine was being perfected. All this did not impress me because, although I am an old-fashioned historian in many respects, I had spent time with groups concerned with electronic data processing. When I visited Boyd in the Firestone Library at Princeton, I asked him how he kept track of subjects. "Oh," he said, "I have that in my notes here"—pointing to a drawer in his desk. I hope his successor, Charles Cullen, has found them. (It was the middle drawer on the right-hand side.) Right then and there, I was confirmed in my belief that I had to control my documents on a computer. All of the great projects of the 1950s and early 1960s reflected the printing and office technologies of the first half of this century. That technological character influenced both the conceptual systems involved and the character of the ultimate volumes.

The editions would be complete, transcribed to a new high of accuracy, and annotated to the best standards of historical professionalism. Although the leading figures involved in the editions and in the Commission were well aware of the practical and theoretical hazards in achieving this concept, all too often the language used was very sweeping. Vexed by prior flawed editions, they vowed that theirs would never have to be redone. The possibility that posterity might not want to do another edition apparently never occurred to them; nor did the idea that each generation chooses a different concept of processing the signals linked to a characteristic technology. Each generation erects its own monuments hoping they will endure like the Pyramids. After Boyd, there was lit-

tle inclination to acknowledge that the editions were valuable simply as useful works of reference, not as flawless products to endure for infinity.

Completeness was simply impossible. No one wanted to print every commission signed by Jefferson, Washington, etc., even though these are technically documents of the great men. Boyd complicated the problem by one of his most important innovations: by consistently printing the letters *to* Jefferson. Implicitly, Boyd was arguing against those interested in literature and against the sentimentalists panting over a great person's words. For history, meaning was defined by the exchange of signals. A Jefferson letter alone contained only a part of the meaning. Automatically, that position increased the problem of hunting down sources. Beyond that, there was no certainty of retrieving documents scattered by the trade; of uncovering all the caches in attics, basements, and odd containers likely to turn up anywhere. Nor could Boyd or the Commission even guarantee the retrieval of sources held in prestigious institutions but incorrectly described, tucked away under other manuscripts, or simply part of that great, glorious backlog we will have access to in the sweet bye and bye.

Clarence Carter's *Territorial Papers of the United States* presented a great contrast. Carter was a fascinating old codger with whom I lunched on a number of occasions, but never to discuss editing. It never occurred to me then that I would be an editor. Like Boyd, Carter was a striking man given, even in his early 70s, to pinching waitresses, which impressed me greatly. Young Ph.Ds. did not do that in the early 1950s, at least not in public. Even more impressive was his singular concentration on turning out volumes. These volumes were devoted not to great men but to themes: the spread of the American governmental system. Ter-

ritory by territory, the thick blue volumes would march westward from the old frontier beyond the east coast mountains to the Pacific. Fiscal problems stopped the march in the Great Plains after Carter's death. The volumes were relatively lightly annotated by post-Boydian standards; and they aspired to an even higher standard of textual accuracy.

What Carter did was to define his scope very narrowly—postal roads, for example, but not Indian affairs, perhaps reflecting a classical training in which roads were part of a Pax Romana—and largely limited his documents to the official federal records. If Boyd's conception was post-Romantic, Carter's was austere classical or legalistic, although not without the singularities one might expect from a man who boasted that he was drawing down two pensions while working for a third (which he never received because he died on the job). As an outgrowth of some concern over the narrowness of Carter's scope and a wish to expand the microfilm publication program of the National Archives, I did a survey in the National Archives of Wisconsin Territory documentation omitted by Carter. Eventually, that resulted in a microfilm supplement to the Wisconsin volumes (M236) in 122 rolls, followed later by Iowa in 102 rolls. Carter's success depended on disregarding the detailed diversity of the past for an intense area of concentration. National origins became a matter of structures and procedures, and the essence of national style a set of legalisms. Although valuable, Carter's volumes lack that personal quality we sometimes call art, which makes the *Jefferson Papers* of Boyd seem oddly both contemporary with its subject but firmly of this century.

Completeness was extended by the Commission's program to figures whose importance and surviving sources did

not warrant such treatment. Even projects viewed as properly limited in scope became subject to inflation. In a planning meeting several years before I became the editor of the *Henry Papers*, a number of us thought 10 or 12 volumes with a microfilm supplement more than adequate. When the question was put, Oliver Wendell Holmes of the Commission quickly said, "I would not settle for less than 20 volumes." His opinion carried the day, but I have silently reduced the total to 15. As I struggle through volume five, I have my doubts. As I look at the wonderful things we have gathered, I wonder if Oliver was right.

As to transcription, Boyd never called for the literalness of Carter, now echoed in a very different manner by an important segment of literary editors. It is simply impossible to translate from holograph to print without introducing changes. Color facsimiles are a possible but not a practical alternative, even if the documents are absolutely legible. The literary editors propose to handle this by an incredible critical apparatus, sometimes producing unreadable pages, now more typically in the form of interminable appendixes. My own preference, largely the practice of other historical editors, is to hew as close to the original as feasible given the conventions of the printing art; publicly to avow any practices routinely changing the text in even the smallest degree; and to discuss in footnotes any textual details bearing even remotely upon the probable meaning of the original author. I am not worried about absolute consistency. The style employed on the *Henry Papers* typically retains raised letters but suppresses intrusive dashes. As Emerson noted, a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. The *Henry Papers* represents an adaptation of the editing practices of the *Adams Papers* determined partly by the differing nature of its materials and by the prefer-

ences of an editor of a different generation.

What becomes clear, on reflection, is the difference between the historical editors, on the one hand, and Carter and the literary editors on the other. We are interested in making available authentic sources to readers in accordance with the best technology and the best historical conceptions of our day. As the latter emphasizes the danger of alterations, we conscientiously opt for hewing as close to the original as possible, as long as the meaning is reasonably clear.

Both Carter (from a legalistic stance) and the literary editors have a sense of the sacredness of the words they process. The historical editors, even those imbued with origins and essences, have a belief in the importance of the purport of the words. Perhaps literalness has a point in dealing with belletristic publications or formal documents such as legal opinions and treaties. Historical editors, however, typically deal not with *Moby Dick* (let alone the Bible), but with unpublished, informal sets of signals. They are overwhelmingly the first to process the signals into print. Historical editors necessarily play roles analogous to the editors and publishers whose treatments of authors present literary editors with occasions to restore texts. In our case, the opportunities for restorations are limited because of a conscious (and conscientious) attempt to minimize deviations from the original. The rare scholar whose research requires the absolutely pristine text should use the manuscript source. Both Boyd (and other historical editors) and the literary editors are mistaken in believing that their editing will do away with the need to consult originals.

But Carter and his literary allies underscore a limitation in the Commission's program derived from Boyd. All the disputes on transcription imply the existence of one best way. I became an

editor by editing a volume of documents for undergraduates. Having observed Carter, I lightly modernized the documents. A sequel to appear this year is also lightly modernized. The standards of the *Henry Papers* are simply inappropriate. I fail to see why undergraduates (and most graduates) need a text of pristine purity with an elaborate phalanx of footnotes for a decent introduction to a particular historical area. At any time there are many standards, each suitable for differing historical purposes. I have no doubt that future generations will come up with conceptions of editing resulting in differing policies on transcription, if only because of changing technology.

What really impressed readers about Boyd, even to this day, was the annotation. Annotations ultimately produced hostility to Boyd and his school. Strictly speaking, a truly comprehensive edition should require less annotation than a selected one. As documents appear in chronological order, a good number of questions and obscurities will dissipate. A selection may properly require more careful and very pointed annotations in order to supply contextual settings missing from the array of documents.

Documents do not speak for themselves. They convey meaning only to educated eyes. Even such eyes may blink uncomprehendingly at references to events, to individuals, and to some historical processes. A writer of an article or a monograph can selectively process only those signals in a body of sources defined and recognized as being within a particular inquiry. In theory, an editor has to consider every word and be mindful of a far broader, less specialized readership. In theory, the editor does not select his topics for annotations but has to deal with whatever is presented in the text. This creates an assumption of objectivity.

In practice, the situation is more com-

plex. The editor has to decide what signals merit annotation and to what depth. But the imperative of the text inevitably produces annotation beyond the scope of analogous work in article or monographic form. Most editors define their footnoting practices around themes in the current literature, particularly in terms of hard factual data. In the *Henry Papers*, if something is of obvious great interest to Joseph Henry, we feel obliged to treat that seriously. Editors are thought not to process historical signals as much as other historians—not to interpret. In fact, the entire process is highly interpretive from the moment a project is launched. Deciding on what to annotate and to what depth are acts of interpretation.

Observing Carter and, later, people like Boyd, Butterfield, and Leonard Labaree (the first editor of the *Franklin Papers*), I was very uncomfortable with their assumption of objectivity. I simply did not believe in it. For better or worse, I publicly announced that I was editing not a great man but the documentary history of the birth of a national scientific community; that I was incapable of bland neutrality but would frankly give interpretations; and that I was interested in a social history of science emphasizing everyday life. In a manner analogous to E. P. Thompson, I wanted to rescue the little men of science (there were no women at first!) from the condescension of posterity. And if that meant long footnotes, so be it. I find it ironic that my only unfavorable review—in five countries—praised my few long footnotes but could not tolerate the attention to details of daily life.

While I feel very sympathetic to Julian Boyd in the matter of annotation, I am conscious of being from a different tradition and generation. My work is, happily, part of what is now the mainstream of the history of science. Documentary collections are part of the

tradition of that field. Favaro published Galileo in 20 volumes. The Dutch issued Huygens in 22 volumes. Darwin is under way, hopefully to be followed by Einstein. Nor is the end in sight.

But I am a historian of science *in the United States*, and one who has labored in the National Archives and in the Library of Congress. I am conscious of the traditions of our national historiography. Julian Boyd means something to me. I simply cannot dismiss him with glib talk about "elitism" or "opinions" or "irrelevant details." We are dealing with the last exemplar of a great tradition of scholarship, one that took the form of a tremendous urge to comprehend the essence of America in all those signals left by Jefferson and his contemporaries. There was a demonic drive in the Firestone Library to know and to communicate that knowledge. What strikes me as an outsider to that specialty, however, is that even before Jesse Lemisch gave his self-righteous blast about great white fathers, Boyd's concerns no longer matched those at the forefront of scholarship. If they had, length of footnotes would not have mattered that much. Boyd was trapped in a paradox. Historians believe the past is different. A believer in documentary evidences of origins and essences assumes their persistence in time. Annotations were credited with providing a context that somehow reconciled persistence and change. It was too much, even for a great man.

Even before the years of the Vietnam War, editing was changing. Comprehensive editions began to fade away as the model. In the Commission and in the National Archives there was a great awareness of microfilming as a form of publication. To date, the Archives sales program includes more than 125,000 master reels. Because I worked on that program, my decision to combine letterpress and microform is not very surpris-

ing. What I do find surprising is the glib assumption by some that the latter is a substitute for edited volumes, particularly in terms of soaring costs for the projects.

The two serve different purposes. The printed editions are usable by a wider range of readers. Microforms are aimed at a narrower specialized audience, an elite of researchers. A typical printed edition will sell about 500 copies; a typical microform edition will sell between 30 and 40 copies. Microforms are cheaper to produce, especially if they consist wholly or largely of a series or collection on the shelf. Most printed editions are the product of extensive hunts for scattered items. The *Henry Papers*, for example, has documents from more than 275 depositories in 18 countries. Costs of preparing microforms rise appreciably if the sources come from many locations. The microfilm supplement to the *Territorial Papers* did not come cheaply. A very significant trend is to prepare high-quality descriptions of microforms, sometimes with lists or indexes. That obviously raises the cost. One can compare the costs of Paul Smith's edition of letters of the delegates to the Continental Congress (the successor to Burnett's edition) with those of the splendid microfilm of the Papers of the Continental Congress prepared by my late colleague Mary Johnson (to which one must add the Ford Foundation's six-figure subvention for preparation of a detailed index). Both are valid strategies arising from the differing sources but aimed at dissimilar audiences.

The purchase price of microforms is also appreciable. A recent microfiche edition of 5500 documents sells for \$1,100. Ten volumes each with 300 selected, annotated documents might list for \$350. From the prospect of these numbers, the high cost of maintaining the staff of the editorial project is a form

of subsidization of a wider, more accessible dissemination of historical information.

I am not arguing against microform editions. We need both printed and microform editions. Quite commonly, editorial projects now prepare both forms. I am particularly anxious that institutions holding significant bodies of archival and personal papers do both. I do not believe that archives, libraries, and historical societies should act merely as passive custodial institutions. All too often, scholars in universities need concrete examples of research possibilities from those who have intimate knowledge of sources.

The editing projects have already provided a few examples. The *Henry Papers* recently issued a collection of Joseph Henry's lectures and essays—lightly annotated and slightly modernized—in an attempt to reach a more popular audience.² Quite often a project collects not only documents but bibliographical sources, iconographic data, and the like. Our project has the personal library of Joseph Henry. The materials gathered by a project constitute an artificial collection, sometimes of great utility for all manner of research. Steven R. Boyd used the files of the projects on the ratification of the Constitution and on the first federal elections to write *The*

Politics of Opposition: Antifederalists and the Acceptance of the Constitution (1979). Staffs of archives, libraries, and historical societies should think of opportunities like John C. Dann's *The Revolution Remembered: Eyewitness Accounts of the War for Independence* (1980), based on the pension files in the National Archives.

I had been asked to consider whether historical editing is a dying art form. My views on that must be perfectly clear. Historical editing is going to survive in some form as long as unpublished sources are the focus of historical research. What we need are more projects devoted to themes, periods, and institutions. We can still learn from Clarence Carter. Under no circumstances should we allow what happened to some of the projects in the wake of Boyd's triumph. When my rounds as a new editor took me to Leonard Labaree, he decried the lack of use of his Franklin materials by colleagues and students at Yale. Under no circumstances should editing projects simply have a life of their own separate from whatever are the ongoing concerns of contemporary scholarship. Projects should not begin and end with the holdings on some shelves. They should start with living historical issues and end by generating new ones by virtue of new sources and cogent annotations.

²*A Scientist in American Life: Essays and Lectures of Joseph Henry*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1980.