

HISTORICAL EDITING AND UNDERGRADUATE TEACHING
A RATIONALE AND A MODEL

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Since the publication in 1950 of the first volume of The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, edited by Julian P. Boyd, the historical profession in the United States has benefited from a revolution in the editing of historical documents. This revolution has been made possible by the generous funding, guidance, and co-operation of numerous institutions and individuals, including the federal government, foundations, university presses, and literally hundreds of historical societies, libraries, archives, and private collectors. The editing revolution has also depended on technological developments in microfilming, photocopying, and related processes such as copy-flo. As a result of these several changes, the editorial projects currently underway at scores of institutions promise to be this generation's most significant contribution to historical scholarship.

A revolution of this scope was destined to affect teaching and curriculum development at the graduate and undergraduate levels, but the impact was somewhat slow. In the late 1960s, while surveying the state of research and the training of historians in the United States, Walter Rundell, Jr., reported that opportunities for training in historical editing appeared to be limited and haphazard, primarily because of the lack of regard for editing projects among academic historians. A few graduate students completed editorial projects for theses and dissertations, and some university professors included editorial training in their courses on historiography and methodology, but the need and potential were greater than these few efforts indicated. Therefore, Rundell recommended the "systematic training of graduate students in the art" and suggested that the National Historical Publications Commission sponsor a seminar in editorial training.¹

The NHPC did take the lead, and in 1972 it sponsored the first of its summer Institutes for the Editing of Historical Documents. In addition, several graduate schools developed courses and programs specifically designed to train students in historical editing, including seminars on historical editing as well as internships with major editorial projects.²

A convincing rationale can also be offered to incorporate historical editing into the undergraduate curriculum. As Stanley J. Idzerda, editor of the Lafayette papers, recently observed, "any person who enters the calling of historians ought to have more than a slight knowledge of what an editor does and what editorial practices and standards are."³ While Idzerda may have had graduate students in mind, his generalization applies with equal validity to the undergraduate study of history. Those who seek a broader understanding of the historical profession and of historical scholarship should be as aware of the revolution in historical editing as of the revolution in quantitative history.

Not only has editing become an increasingly important part of historical scholarship in the United States; it has also become a subject of considerable controversy among historians. Critics have complained about the slowness with which major projects proceed, about the great resources which have been allocated to these projects, about the persons and groups whose papers have been selected for editing, and about the quantity and quality of annotation which editors have provided for their projects. Significantly, the debate has not

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been merely between those who edit and those who do not. The debate continues among editors themselves.⁴ Taken together, the criticisms and debate raise important questions about the quality and direction of historical editing and about the profession's priorities. Seen in this perspective, historical editing should be included in undergraduate courses on historiography and methodology.

More importantly, teachers should develop courses specifically devoted to historical editing. Editing requires skills and habits of intellect which the profession should cherish and develop in students at any level--intellectual curiosity, perseverance in research, a close reading of sources, an ability to place individual documents into a broader historical context, care and precision in the use of language, and consistency and accuracy in methodology. The student who edits documents faces the challenge of having to decipher a perhaps illegible or indistinct handwriting and of applying a set of editorial standards rigorously and consistently. In addition, he confronts problems of meaning and context. He must not merely transcribe a document but must make sense out of it as well. He must attempt to place it in a broader perspective, and, in so doing, he becomes a better historian and gains greater appreciation of the historical discipline.

The possibilities for designing a course on historical editing are numerous, dependent, in part, on the teacher's own interests, on the budgetary constraints under which he works, on the availability of documents, and on the students with whom he is working. The suggestions which I offer are based on the experience of teaching a one-semester seminar, "An Introduction to Historical Editing." Funded by an Education Projects Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the seminar focused on the activities of Major General Philip Schuyler during the summer of 1777. Schuyler was commander of the Northern Department of the Revolutionary army when Fort Ticonderoga was surrendered to the British under General Burgoyne. Schuyler was also responsible for the withdrawal of American forces until he was relieved of his command by General Horatio Gates shortly before the British defeat at Saratoga.

Within this chronological framework, the seminar focused particularly on a letterbook which Schuyler's aides kept during these months. The letterbook had been recently "discovered" in the manuscript collections of the American Antiquarian Society and had not been used by Schuyler's biographers. The letterbook was thus an ideal focal point for an editing seminar. First, its size was limited, yet it could be placed into the context of an enormously broad range of primary and secondary materials. Second, the letterbook contained orders and letters relating to an important phase of the military and political history of the Revolution. Third, the American Antiquarian Society was pleased to make a copy of the letterbook available to the seminar. And, fourth, the editing of the letterbook would require a considerable amount of co-operative work among the members of the seminar.

I do not wish to describe the activities of the seminar in great detail. Rather, I hope to suggest some of the questions and problems which a teacher must answer in using historical editing as a teaching method.

While most teachers have done little or no editing, there are several ways to gain the necessary experience. Aside from participation as a staff member on a major editorial project, an individual can apply for one of the summer institutes of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. In addition, as I have noted, several universities have incorporated editing into their graduate programs. Beyond these sources of formal training, a teacher can and should read as widely as possible in the literature on historical editing (books, articles, essay reviews, and book reviews) as well as a broad selection of edited documents. However, the one inescapable and most desirable cure for inexperience

is to learn editing by doing editing, to work through the kinds of documents which the students will edit. The teacher can thus become completely familiar with the problems which the students will encounter and, therefore, be able to offer solutions and to evaluate their work. Indeed, such first-hand experience may convince the teacher that he has no aptitude or taste for historical editing.

Some aspects of editing are frustrating and enormously time-consuming. For example, a research historian who finds a manuscript very difficult to read may be tempted to pass by such a document or to ignore those words or passages which are especially difficult. The editor faces the same temptation but knows that he cannot yield so easily. After all, how many times can he place "illeg." in brackets, and thus admit his failure? In this regard, having students work in teams on editorial projects may prove advantageous. There are no hard-and-fast rules for deciphering illegible or indistinct handwriting. Some individuals have more success than others, perhaps because of their patience, their imagination, or their "eye" for handwriting.

Another particularly time-consuming but absolutely indispensable aspect of editing is proofreading. By the time a document is in its final typescript form, it will have been proofread several times. This, too, is a good reason for having students work in teams on editorial projects. The Harvard Guide to American History suggests that the historical editor's motto should read "Accuracy without Pedantry. Consistency first, last, and always."⁵ Anyone undertaking to teach historical editing should be fully prepared to apply that motto to the work of his students.

A course on historical editing can be offered effectively only as a seminar. Not only are relatively small numbers of students important; it is also desirable that there be a large block of time in which material can be presented and discussed. A standard lecture format will provide neither the atmosphere nor the time. Furthermore, a limited enrollment will encourage the development of scholarly co-operation, respect, and criticism among the participants in the seminar. My own preference is to admit students on the basis of their major, class, and academic record. Ideally, therefore, they should be senior history majors with superior academic records or with other significant qualifications. There are, however, other approaches which teachers might take. For example, historical editing might be an interesting and productive way to introduce beginning students to the study of history.

There are many kinds of materials which are appropriate for an editing seminar. A teacher might use documents which he has accumulated in the course of his own research. This has the very practical advantage that the teacher is already familiar with them and can more easily anticipate problems of editorial method and research. In addition, many collections of documents are available on microfilm, for example, from the National Archives and from historical societies. The National Historical Publications and Records Commission has sponsored scores of such projects.⁶ Individual reels of microfilm are relatively inexpensive, as are the detailed printed inventories which accompany them.

Another source of documents is the university or college's own archives, a local historical society, or a local library. I would particularly encourage the use of these sources. If the documents concern the immediate area and its history, related research materials are likely to be available for the students. The use of locally accessible documents also presents the opportunity for close co-operation with local institutions and members of their staffs. Local experts can provide valuable insights concerning the manuscripts, the nature of the collections of which they are a part, and the local or regional history which the documents describe. In addition, co-operation with local

institutions can mean that the students' work, in its typescript form, can serve a scholarly purpose beyond the limits of the editing seminar.

Regardless of the source and nature of the documents which the seminar will use, it should be clear that a considerable "lead time" is necessary for planning. Documents must be located and carefully examined, copies obtained, and a careful schedule worked out to take into account the variety and difficulty of the documents as well as the number and qualifications of the students who will edit them.

Costs for a seminar on historical editing will vary with the kinds and numbers of documents to be used and the way in which they are to be reproduced. For example, will the students work from microfilm, from photocopies, or from copy-flo? Costs will also vary with the particular teaching techniques involved in the seminar. For example, will all members of the seminar receive copies of each member's work for purposes of criticism?

There is also a final consideration: will the seminar's work be professionally typed and perhaps duplicated so that each member will have a copy? I strongly recommend professional typing. The students will be doing a great deal of typing as they transcribe, proofread, correct, and annotate their material. Professional typing of the final typescript will save considerable time and will result in clean and uniform copy. A relatively modest fee might be assessed from each member of the seminar to defray at least the costs of final typing and perhaps the costs of microfilming and photocopying the documents which the students will edit. Such a fee seems reasonable if one assumes that the students' expenses for books will be quite small.

In planning the seminar, careful attention must be given to the relationship between the amount of actual editing which the students will do and the time available to finish their work in a satisfactory manner. The course can be divided roughly into thirds. In the first third, the students would study the history and historiography of editing, with particular emphasis on developments since the 1950s. Their readings might include articles by Julian P. Boyd, Lyman H. Butterfield, Lester J. Cappon, Donald Jackson, Jesse Lemisch, and Robert A. Rutland.⁷

During this first segment of the course, the students would also examine different editorial methods, starting with the literal, the expanded, and the modernized methods as set forth in the Harvard Guide. Statements of editorial procedure from major projects such as the Adams, Jefferson, and Franklin papers should also be studied.

The students should apply the three basic editorial methods to documents which they will be editing. This will allow them to assess the relative merits of each method and then to develop a clearly written and detailed set of editorial guidelines which they will follow in transcribing their documents. As they begin to work with various editorial models, they would also learn to proofread and to correct transcriptions.

During the middle third of the course, the students would transcribe, proofread, and correct the documents, seeking to be accurate and consistent in their methodology. Each student would be responsible for transcribing a particular number of documents, and two other students would proofread the transcripts. Together the three students would be graded on the accuracy and consistency of that group of documents.

As the students transcribe their documents, they would also compile lists of people, places, things, and events which may need identification or

clarification as part of the process of annotation. By the end of the middle segment of the course, the students would have transcribed the documents completely, accurately, and consistently, and the documents would be ready for final typing.

The final third of the course would be devoted to the research for and writing of footnotes, headnotes, and the general introduction to the entire work. Here, the students will face a problem which all editors must confront: how much annotation is necessary or appropriate? In answering this question they should consider a recent statement of policy by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. The Commission noted "the unfortunate tendency of some editions to display an inordinate, unwarranted amount of document annotation." Annotation must provide "clarification, information and explanation," but not "suppositive commentary or irrelevant detail." Pointing to delays in the publication of Commission-sponsored editions, the Commission stated that "the research involved in unearthing information on obscure individuals or insignificant events mentioned incidentally in documents is a laborious and expensive process with dubious value."⁸ The student-editors will have to determine how to follow this advice and how to know when their research is sufficient but also when their research is inadequate.

If all goes well, by the end of the term the students will have edited, with consistency and accuracy, a group of documents. They will have completed the research necessary to annotate the documents, and they will have written introductions which will place the documents in a larger context. In learning the work of historical editors, they will have become better students of history. If that happens, the course will have been successful.

NOTES

¹"Documentary Editing," in Walter Rundell, Jr., In Pursuit of American History: Research and Training in the United States (Norman, Oklahoma, 1970), 260-283, quotation from 283. See also Lester J. Cappon, "A Rationale for Historical Editing Past and Present," William and Mary Quarterly, XXIII (January, 1966), 56-75.

²These institutions include Emory University, the University of Kansas, the University of Maryland, the University of New Orleans, New York University, Princeton University, the University of South Carolina, the University of Virginia, and the College of William and Mary. In addition, the Massachusetts Historical Society conducts a seminar open to graduate students at Tufts, Brandeis, Boston College, and Boston University. See Annotation (the newsletter of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission), IV (October and December, 1976), V (May, 1977). Graduate students at the University of Maryland edit a journal, The Maryland Historian, as do students at The American University, The Journal of Historical Studies. The NHPRC has also announced an intern program for undergraduates and beginning graduate students; information can be obtained from the Executive Director, NHPRC, National Archives Building, Washington, D.C. 20408.

³Stanley J. Idzerda, "The Editor's Training and Status in the Historical Profession," in Leslie W. Dunlap and Fred Shelley, eds., The Publication of American Historical Manuscripts (Iowa City, Iowa, 1976), 18.

⁴See, for example, Leonard W. Levy's review of The Papers of James Madison, IV-VII, in the Journal of American History, LIX (June, 1972), 115-117; Jesse Lemisch, "The American Revolution Bicentennial and the Papers of Great White Men," AHA Newsletter, IX (November, 1971), 7-21; Lemisch, "The Papers of a Few

Great Black Men and a Few Great White Women," Maryland Historian, VI (Spring, 1975), 60-66; Haskell Monroe, "Some Thoughts for an Aspiring Historical Editor," American Archivist, XXXII (April, 1969), 147-159; and Brooke Hindle's review of The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, XVI-XVII, in the Journal of American History, LX (March, 1974), 1071-1073.

⁵ Frank Freidel, ed., Harvard Guide to American History (rev. ed., 2 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1974), I, 36.

⁶ National Historical Publications and Records Commission, Publications Catalog 1976 (Washington, D.C., 1976).

⁷ Julian P. Boyd, "'God's Altar Needs Not Our Pollishings,'" New York History, XXXIX (January, 1958), 3-21, and "Historical Editing in the United States: The Next Stage?" American Antiquarian Society, Proceedings, LXXII (October, 1962), 309-328; Lyman H. Butterfield, "Archival and Editorial Enterprise in 1850 and in 1950: Some Comparisons and Contrasts," American Philological Society, Proceedings, XCVIII (June, 1954), 159-170, and "Historical Editing in the United States: The Recent Past," American Antiquarian Society, Proceedings, LXXII (October, 1962), 283-308; Cappon, "A Rationale for Historical Editing Past and Present" and "American Historical Editors before Jared Sparks: 'they will plant a forest . . .,'" William and Mary Quarterly, XXX (July, 1973), 375-400; Donald Jackson, "Starting in the Papers Game," Scholarly Publishing, III (October, 1971), 28-38, and "The Editor's Other Functions," in Dunlap and Shelley, eds., The Publication of American Historical Manuscripts, 69-76; Jesse Lemisch's two articles, cited in note 4; and Robert A. Rutland, "Recycling Early National History Through the Papers of the Founding Fathers," American Quarterly, XXVIII (Summer, 1976), 250-261.

⁸ Annotation, IV (October, 1976).