

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association
for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)


Documentary Editing, Association for

3-2000

War Stories: Review of *Home Front Soldier: The Story of a GI and His Italian American Family During World War II*. Richard Aquila, ed.

Michael E. Stevens
Wisconsin Historical Society

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit>

 Part of the [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), and the [Technical and Professional Writing Commons](#)

Stevens, Michael E., "War Stories: Review of *Home Front Soldier: The Story of a GI and His Italian American Family During World War II*. Richard Aquila, ed." (2000). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. 469.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit/469>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Documentary Editing, Association for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

War Stories

MICHAEL E. STEVENS

Home Front Soldier: The Story of a GI and His Italian American Family During World War II. Richard Aquila, ed. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999. xi + 280 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-7914-4075-3; \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 0-7914-4076B1.

One of the joys of documentary editing is the opportunity to watch stories unfold in the documents. Thus, it is not surprising to see academic and trade presses publishing works aimed at a popular audience that rely heavily on historical texts. In the past several decades, documentary editors have done a remarkable job in creating standards, although most of their energies have focused on scholarly editions. Those efforts have been less successful in reaching those who prepare popular editions. *Home Front Soldier* is a good example of a work that effectively uses documents to tell a story, yet has not benefited from the application of modern editorial standards.

Home Front Soldier is, above all, a labor of love. A mixture of social history and family lore, this collection of family letters is interesting, informative, and, at times, moving. Richard Aquila, professor of history and director of the American Studies Program at Ball State University, and host of National Public Radio's *Rock & Roll America*, has edited and annotated the World War II-era letters of his father, Philip Aquila. The elder Aquila, the son of working-class Italian immigrants in Buffalo, New York, served stateside during the war as a chemical warfare instructor between 1943 and 1946. Following Philip's death in 1994, his historian-son acquired a collection of five hundred letters that Philip had sent to his sister, Mary, between August 1944 and November 1945.

On first learning of the existence of his father's letters, Richard Aquila had hoped to find commentary on the war and the great public issues of the time, but the letters turned out to be far more typical of the genre

written by young men away from home for the first time. They contained accounts of the mundane events of life in the stateside military and commented extensively on family concerns back at home. As a historian, Aquila recognized that the letters provided a running commentary on the dynamics of family life among Italian Americans of the era. They revealed deep bonds of affection in the Aquila family as well as petty feuds and squabbles, and shed light on the hopes and dreams of young people separated by war. Collectively, they offered insights into the many roles that Phil Aquila had to play—son, brother, husband, father, soldier, and first-generation American. Shifting between his roles as historian and as family commentator, Richard Aquila teases out the meaning of the letters in the introduction, the epilogue, and the annotation. In the introduction, he tells the story of his acquisition of the letters, his family's history, and the larger meaning of the texts. Reading the letters serially, one finds oneself enmeshed in the inner workings of this particular working-class family and caring about the outcome of their daily tasks, misunderstandings, and joys. This volume is not a conventional edition, in which the editor maintains a reserve and distance from the subject, but is a personal tribute of a son to his father. It suggests ways in which documentary materials, selected and presented, can provide readers with the same sense of discovery that historians experience.

Aquila adds explanatory notes in the text of the letters within brackets that are written in a colloquial, conversational style. His departure from a conventional form of annotation gives the book an engaging, personal touch. The rationale behind some of his choices for annotation seems obscure. Why add a note that describes a mailing sticker used to send a cross to his mother (p. 100)? Why transcribe the text of a preprinted Mother's Day card (p. 162)? His description of a novena as "a special Catholic Easter service" is off the mark (p. 141).

Given Aquila's interest in telling his father's story through his letters as opposed to a traditional narrative, it is a pity that his treatment of the text itself is so problematic. The editor fails by telling the reader little about his editorial practices. He notes that in minor instances names have been changed to avoid "embarrassment," that

MICHAEL E. STEVENS is Wisconsin State Historian and administrator of the Division of Public History at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. He is co-author of *Editing Historical Documents: A Handbook of Practice* and the editor of eleven documentary volumes, including *Letters from the Front, 1898–1945*; *Women Remember the War, 1941–1945*; and *Yesterday's Future: The Twentieth Century Begins*.

“extraneous statements have been removed as indicated by ellipses,” that repetitive phrases used to open letters have been deleted along with “general comments about the weather or other superfluous statements that add nothing to the narrative” (p. 49). This brief statement raises more questions than it answers. What is the difference between an “extraneous statement” and a “superfluous” one? Are both noted with ellipses? How many names have been changed? Might these not have at least been noted by putting the pseudonyms in brackets?

Aquila’s silence on other textual questions is equally troubling. Did he change spelling, capitalization, and punctuation? Did he correct grammar and syntax? Because he uses the first page of a letter of 22 April 1945 as an illustration on page 5, one can deduce an editorial policy by comparing it to the text that is printed on page 152. Aquila corrected spelling (“dessert” becomes “desert”); modified punctuation (“its” is transformed to “it’s” and a comma is added to a series); changed ampersands to “and”; and standardized capitalization (“ma” becomes “Ma”). Each of these interventions could have been easily justified, especially in a volume aimed at a popular audience, but the absence of a statement of editorial practice leaves the reader wondering about how the text has been handled.

One might argue that, in a volume such as *Home Front Soldier*, concerns over the treatment of the text are pedantic. One can still read and enjoy the letters without knowing editorial policy. Yet Aquila himself argues that his edition will “demonstrate the impact that public education had on immigrant families” and that his father’s generation was “schooled enough in grammar and sentence structure” (p.11). To do this, we need to see what his father actually wrote. The younger Aquila’s editorial interventions and his silence on textual matters obstructs that end and leaves the reader guessing what was written by the father and what was changed by the son.

Home Front Soldier shows how documentary materials can be used to reach a popular audience and suggests ways for historians to use texts creatively. It is unfortunate that university press review committees do not insist that authors exercise more care in the way they present edited documents. It also reminds documentary editors of the importance of educating their historian colleagues and university press editors about the importance of documentary standards.



Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., and Ronald A. Bosco. Photo by Tom Mason.

Boydston Prize for 1999

Ronald A. Bosco has been awarded the third Jo Ann Boydston Essay Prize for “The Expanding Textual Circle of New England Transcendentalism,” *Text* 11 (1998). The essay-review begins with a four-page prologue which contains an overview of the historical and cultural significance of New England Transcendentalism from the 1830s to the 1860s and the recent editorial history of the works of Thoreau and Emerson, as well as Margaret Fuller, Convers Francis, William Ellery Channing, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Louisa May Alcott, and other less-known figures in the circle of Transcendentalism. The review itself focuses on *Jones Very: The Complete Poems*, edited by Helen R. Deese (University of Georgia Press, 1993) and *The Selected Letters of Mary Moody Emerson*, edited by Nancy Craig Simmons (University of Georgia Press, 1993).

The citation reads: “Professor Bosco’s essay-review not only takes into account the cultural and historical significance of New England Transcendentalism but also places Jones Very and Mary Moody Emerson within that intellectual and literary context in an artfully fashioned narrative that demonstrates their own importance as well as that of scholarly editions of biographical criticism; it is a model of scholarly erudition and critical acumen that successfully addresses both editorial specialists and non-specialist readers and that argues lucidly and convincingly that new editions of previously little-known or underappreciated literary figures are important in shaping and modifying our knowledge of American literature and culture.”

The Boydston Prize committee members were George I. Geckle III (chair), Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., and Barbara Oberg.