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# *Documentary Reviewing Reviewed: A Survey of the Book Review Policies of Selected Historical Journals*

GREGG L. LINT\*

Book reviews in many ways are more important for the documentary publication than the monograph. In the latter case the book is published, reviewed, and in a sense forgotten. Multiple volume documentary editions, published over a long period, should receive and, indeed, require constant review, each new volume being compared with the preceding ones. The importance of reviews is no less for smaller selective editions of only a few volumes or on microforms. For the documentary edition, much more a reference book than the monograph, reviews should inform potential users of its utility and help to maintain quality.

For these reasons it is discouraging, even alarming, when the review of documentary publications is curtailed, as it has been in the pages of the *American Historical Review*. In the December 1979 issue of the *Newsletter* of the American Historical Association the editors of the *AHR* presented a revised or, in their words, restated policy on the review of documentary publications. In the future (actually it began with the April 1979 issue of the *AHR*) most documentary editions would not be reviewed, but rather would receive a short listing in a new section: "Documents and Bibliographies." According to the editors this decision was due to space limitations imposed by rising cost and because "reviews of documentary publications tend to become brief essays by the reviewer based on the new sources that appear in the volume."

For the documentary editor, few decisions could be

more disheartening. Superficially the *AHR*'s policy can be criticized for the commentary it provides on the journal's apparent inability to select competent scholars to fulfill its conception of what constitutes an adequate review of a documentary publication, but the implications and effect go beyond that. Short notices, usually containing far less information than a publisher's own catalogue, cannot substitute for a full, analytical, reasoned review. More importantly, if such a policy signals a trend then documentary editions face a bleak future of being relegated to a historical backwater, somewhere beneath monographs, for the *AHR*'s policy has implicitly designated the documentary publication and the historical editor as being of less importance than the monograph and the traditional historian.

Because of the questions raised by the revised policy of the *AHR*, a survey was undertaken of historical journals that in the past had carried reviews of documentary publications. Each journal editor was asked what his or her policy was toward such reviews, whether they posed any special problems for the editor, and for any other observations that he or she might wish to make on the review of such works.

In some respects the results of the survey were encouraging. As might be expected, journals dealing with a broad range of history tended to review more documentary publications than those limited to the history of a particular region or state. Many of the smaller journals indicated, however, that they would review more documentary editions if they received review copies, which often they do not. In addition, all the journal editors that responded reported that they plan to continue to review volumes of edited documents, despite their increasing numbers, and for the most part stated that such reviews pose no unusual problems.

A number of editors directed their comments at the difficulties of dealing with a lengthy series of volumes. Most believed that after the review of the first volume or volumes of a new series, later reviews should wait until a number of volumes had accumulated, which would then be reviewed as a group. This practice has the advantage of

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saving space while permitting the reviewer to take a broad view of the publication and better determine if the standard of the initial volumes had been maintained or improved. In the same vein was the desire of many of the editors to have one reviewer deal with initial and subsequent volumes of an edition so as to provide an evenness of treatment and hopefully a more knowledgeable reviewer.

In regard to obtaining an adequate review, most of the journal editors believed that it was more difficult to review a documentary publication than a monograph. In part they believed that this was because the reviewer of a documentary edition needed to be more creative or just work harder in order to "find themes and patterns in a set of documents." As to the review itself, one editor noted the danger of obtaining a "flat" summary of the volume's contents. Another stated that he did not want his reviewer to become involved in arcane arguments over editorial method, a subject that he believed could be dealt with best in a separate essay. Despite the concern over the difficulty of obtaining first-rate reviews of documentary publications, few of the editors believed that any special instructions needed to be given the reviewers. When such instructions were issued, they generally concerned such matters as avoiding lengthy character sketches and checking original manuscripts against the printed text.

In their comments on the choice of reviewers, none of the journal editors indicated any problems in obtaining willing applicants. Indeed, one stated that the prospect of obtaining high-priced volumes of a documentary publication free of charge was enough in itself to encourage reviewers. Others noted that traditional historians were not necessarily the best reviewers because of their tendency to dwell too much on historical context at the expense of editorial practice. But as one editor stated, while he would like to have editors as reviewers "these people are often unwilling to review the work of their fellow editors."

The results of the survey show little that is new or surprising, but they do deserve comment. While individual reviews of all volumes in an edition is desirable, group reviews of later volumes in a series do not seem inappropriate. A desire to save space and avoid a number of very similar reviews over a relatively short period seems justifiable, but not if it permits questionable editorial practices to proceed too long unchallenged, keeps important new information from potential users, or allows for superficial reviews because of a large amount of material to be dealt with in a limited space. Such considerations should also not be permitted to discriminate against selective editions composed of only a few volumes or in microform, which seems to be the future course of most editorial projects. Neither should it mean that some volumes are never reviewed or preclude individual reviews in special cases, as when a new editor comes to a project or a change of format takes place. Along the same lines, a

single reviewer for several volumes in an edition seems justified, even desirable, but not at the expense of repetitive, inadequate reviews.

Of more importance, perhaps, is the divergence that the survey shows between what the documentary and journal editor see as essential for an adequate review of a documentary publication. For the documentary editor the consideration of the content of a volume and the placing of it in a historical context is important, but so too is a discussion of editorial method. It is natural that journal editors, particularly those of small journals, whose readership is composed of non-editors should wish to avoid technical discussions of editorial method. However, to a large degree editorial policies determine the usefulness of a documentary publication and for that reason questions of format, criteria for selection, usefulness of index, amount and appropriateness of annotation, and general style need to be considered.

In the final analysis it should be remembered by both the journal editor and the reviewer that a documentary publication is different from a monograph. Some of the problems that the documentary as well as the journal editor see with reviews of documentary publications because of this difference might be resolved if the journals were more ready, as apparently they are not, to provide the reviewer with special instructions on the review of documentary editions. The reviewer needs to be reminded to check the annotation and the application of the editorial policies that are usually set down in the introduction. The reviewer should note whether a new series replaces previous editions and if it contains new information or documents not found elsewhere. Such directions to the reviewer would make it easier to avoid the "flat" review or that which is merely a restatement of the introduction with little indication that the reviewer actually read the volume under consideration.

Documentary editors also have a responsibility and should not act as if the quality of book reviews is akin to the "sleeping dog" and thus should be left to lie. They need to inform the journal editor of their thoughts on reviews. They should also be more willing to enter into the reviewing process and not just in the pages of the *ADE Newsletter*. If specialists in a field of history are willing to review monographs by other specialists in the same field, why should editors be unwilling to review the work of their fellow editors? In the end, who is better qualified to do a full, analytical, reasoned review of a volume of edited documents than another editor?