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# Editing Military History in the Twenty-First Century

Edward G. Lengel

Military historians are not usually accused of worrying about trendiness. More typically they seem like stodgy traditionalists, scoffing at postmodernism and its various spin-offs and fantasizing about putting Foucault in the path of a cannonball at Gettysburg and shouting, “Deconstruct this!” At academic conferences and in university departments, military historians are outsiders: stubbornly following tales of great battles and dead white males while their presumably more “relevant” colleagues don red berets and scribble manifestoes in smoke-filled rooms. Documentary editors who work in military history are, if anything, doubly outsiders: fearing either to venture into social history, or to join traditional scholars in interpreting source material by writing articles and monographs.

Yet times are changing. Among military historians, one of the hottest topics nowadays is the “social history of warfare.” This blanket term covers: studies of the behavior of men in battle; examinations of trends in wartime societies via statistics; research in newspapers, letters, and diaries on propaganda and popular perceptions, as well as feisty postmodernist tracts that deconstruct warfare, “dismember the male,” and tell us that World War II didn’t really exist. Study of these topics has completely changed the way scholars understand the history of warfare. A further step in the transformation of military historical scholarship, the integration of documentary editing into the mainstream scholarly endeavor, will come when documentary editors wake up to realize that they are not just “blue-collar academics”—a term that makes them seem like glorified office drones—but historians too. With that realization will come the understanding that they are historians with especially valuable training and tools of a sort that qualify them to understand and explain their topics better than many other scholars.

As the profession of documentary editing evolves in the twenty-first century and new, streamlined projects appear that take full advantage of the new technology, it becomes increasingly clear that documentary editors can no longer remain content in their dreary little corners full of brown envelopes

and dog-eared old genealogy volumes. No longer, it seems, should the life of a documentary editor consist solely of plodding along through manuscripts day after day, ruining backs and eyes, suffering through those white-knuckle moments when an *i* looks like an *e* or a *c*, and worrying about whether Private Smith was born in 1742 or 1743, while the “real” historians do all the interpreting and writing. Until recently, most documentary editors have served as obedient handmaids to history, dutifully preparing source materials for professional historians to use and interpret and then going into raptures when their hard work gets mentioned by Joe Ellis or David McCullough in the acknowledgements to their latest book. Few of us have been willing to consider that we might be historians and—horrors!—write books and articles too. Yet the truth is that a documentary editor can also be a scholar and a historian—well-read, interested in and aware of research and trends in his or her field, and producing not just edited volumes but also research and narrative writing.

In the old days, before the great documentary editing projects of the late twentieth century began arranging and transcribing the papers of great historical figures, the question of whether a documentary editor could also be a historian, or vice versa, was not subject to debate. Scholars writing biographies of great leaders and generals like Wellington, Napoleon, or Grant often spent years arranging and cataloguing their subject’s private papers while perusing the material for their own work. For these historians, a collection of papers was a resource to be mined selectively. The book, or narrative, naturally came first, and papers that had no apparent relevance to that project—routine reports on supplies, returns, and other administrative materials, as well as letters unrelated to great campaigns and battles—were often ignored.

Modern documentary editors, by contrast, typically spend much of their professional lives immersed in every facet of their subject’s written legacy. They have the unique perspective of being able to view a collection of papers as a whole, allowing those who specialize in military documents, for example, to consider military command not just from the standpoint of campaigns, battles, and relations among members of the high command, but also of discipline, training, logistics, civil-military relations, and a host of other day-to-day issues that are the meat of military history. This broadened approach offers particular benefits to editors of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century documents, since the papers of military commanders from that era record in comparatively compact fashion not just their lives, but the lives of the armies they led.

This ability to comprehend a collection of military papers as a whole is no mean advantage. Armies, as all military historians know, are like organisms. They function on many levels. And while what a commander decides on the battlefield is crucial, it is important to remember that combat makes up only a tiny, if dramatic part in the life in the army. The rest is taken up with comparatively mundane but nonetheless critical matters such as recruitment, training, communications, intelligence, reconnaissance, movement, and supply. In twentieth- and twenty-first- century armies, responsibility for such things spread among the thousands of individuals who made up the various echelons of support and staff. And while they left a documentary or electronic trail, so to speak, their records are much too complex and extensive to be encompassed in any single repository. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, command was much more of a personal affair, and a commander in chief's responsibilities, while not necessarily greater than those of his modern equivalents, extended to every tier of his army.

George Washington is an excellent case in point. About a year and a half ago, I completed the index for volume 13 of the *Revolutionary War Series* of the *Papers of George Washington*, a volume that covers the heart of the Valley Forge encampment in the early months of 1778. Now the predominant subject headings in a typical Washington Papers index are, predictably, things like Continental Army, Continental Congress, British army, British navy, militia, fortifications, officers, and so on. All receive their share of attention in volume 13, but in addition I found myself accumulating endless references to headings and subheadings like clothing: purchase and procurement, commissaries; Continental army: arrangement and organization; Continental army: recruiting, deserters, forage, health, horses, hospitals, liquor, livestock, loyalists, money; officers: resignations, pay, plundering and depredations, prisoners, provisions, punishments, quartermasters, wagons; and, of course, Washington, George: complaints of. Seemingly mundane, these sorts of entries effectively tell the real story of what happened at Valley Forge.

Valley Forge has long been a part of the Washington mystique. The image of ragged, barefoot, and starving soldiers shivering miserably while the commander in chief kneels in prayer in the snow is ingrained in the national memory. The picture is not wholly inaccurate. The soldiers were ragged, barefoot, and starving. Yet as a documentary editor who examines the entirety of Washington's military papers for this period will see, there was a lot else going on too. Washington would be best represented, not kneeling in the snow, but pacing the floors of the Isaac Potts house, dictating another

letter to Congress or a state governor, cursing Commissary General of Purchases William Buchanan, or poring over an elaborate plan for the reconstruction of the Continental army with a visiting Congressional committee. It was Washington's skill as an administrator and diplomat that ultimately saved the army at Valley Forge.

Historians are already familiar with the provision crisis at Valley Forge that reached its height in February 1778. It came about not from an actual shortage of foodstuffs in the countryside, but because of deficiencies in procurement and distribution. Loyalist or simply pragmatic civilians made good profits selling flour and other supplies to the British in Philadelphia, but American commissaries had a terrible time getting the farmers to sell food for Washington's army. British hard money was understandably much more attractive than Continental certificates or paper money. When American agents were able to find food, they often found it impossible bring it to camp because of the shortage of wagons, the poor roads made worse by wet weather, and most importantly the absence or incompetence of commissaries and quartermasters. As a result the Continental army came perilously close to dissolution. The first signs of mutiny had already appeared when Washington launched an all-out effort to feed the army in February.

There were limits, of course, to what the commander in chief could accomplish on his own. In the long term only Congress could enact the needed reforms, and it was not until the appointment of Nathanael Greene as quartermaster general in March 1778 and the onset of drier weather that some of the most fundamental problems of transport would improve. In the short term, however, the results of Washington's intervention were profound. A grand forage that he ordered in February and March brought in enough cattle and supplies to meet immediate needs. At the same time, Washington wrote an astonishing number of letters to civilian officials, including delegates, governors, and humble commissaries, skillfully dramatizing the army's situation and putting pressure where it was most needed in order to get the creaky supply mechanism working. Years of experience in both the French and Indian and Revolutionary wars had made him remarkably adept in manipulating people—an often undervalued aspect of the military art that demands just the right combination of flattering, complaining, soothing and cajoling—and at Valley Forge it allowed him to get at least part of what he wanted. There was nothing he could do with the likes of William Buchanan or clothier general James Mease, but because of Washington's efforts their deputies and other civil officials made the extra effort necessary to halt the crisis.

One thing Washington did *not* do to meet the army's supply needs was carry out large-scale supply seizures from civilians. He may have remembered how one of his early attempts to seize horses for the Virginia Regiment in the French and Indian War made a mob of farmers threaten to blow out his brains, but Washington's primary reasons for avoiding confiscations were more political. "Such procedures," he wrote the Board of War, "may relieve for an instant—but eventually will prove of the most pernicious consequence—Besides spreading disaffection & jealousy in the people, they never fail even in the most veteran Armies under the most rigid & exact discipline to raise in the Soldiery a disposition to licentiousness—plunder and Robbery, which has ever been found exceedingly difficult to suppress and which has not only proved ruinous to the Inhabitants, but in many instances to Armies themselves."<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, even without confiscations Continental soldiers and militia at Valley Forge showed an unsettling disposition to rob farmers and plunder the countryside, although Washington tried his best to put a stop to it. His oft-cited respect for civilian authority extended to a strong sense of the need for his army to win, or at least not alienate, the hearts and minds of the civilian population. It is often forgotten that Washington's military campaigns from Virginia to New York were fought in a region where a large part of the population was pro-British, and much of the rest deeply ambivalent about the American cause. It could have been much worse, however, and a callous commander in chief might have provoked a popular revulsion against the revolution that would have crippled the war effort in the mid-Atlantic states. Washington's policy toward civilians was sometimes harsh—he was not above hanging a few traitors by way of example or wrecking mills to prevent their supplying the British—but never punitive by eighteenth-century standards, and he largely succeeded in preventing loyalists from getting completely out of hand.

Another of Washington's preoccupations at Valley Forge was the reform of the army. Steuben's dramatic drilling of the Continental troops during the winter encampment has a tendency to overshadow Washington's tireless efforts to rebuild the very foundations of an army sapped by weak recruiting; officer resignations and disputes; poor allocation of arms, ammunition, and manpower; and supply mismanagement. When Congress dispatched a committee to camp in January it provided an opportunity for the com-

<sup>1</sup> *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series. Volume 13, December 1777-February 1778.* Edited by Edward G. Lengel (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 112.

mander in chief to lay out his plans in detail. Typically, he had first asked all of his general officers to submit written proposals for army reform, and he evidently considered their suggestions carefully. Nathanael Greene sent Washington the lengthiest plan, and when the commander in chief submitted his own proposals to the committee he leaned heavily on Greene's ideas, sometimes repeating them verbatim. Washington's letter to the camp committee on army reform, dated 29 January 1778, is one of the longest he ever wrote—it runs twenty-eight pages in the tiny font we use for our printed volumes—and contains explicit recommendations on everything from recruiting, amalgamating infantry regiments, artillery, engineers, and a half pay and pensionary establishment for retired officers, to military justice, hospital reform, camp sanitation, the distribution of liquor, and conscripting slaves as wagon drivers. In some cases, Congress waited years before adopting his suggestions, but in the long term they had a very beneficial effect on the army.

It is important to keep in mind that Washington administered the army at Valley Forge almost entirely on his own. Indeed, he had no other choice, for officer resignations were rampant. Poor pay, rank disputes, and simple war-weariness all played their part in this, and the result was that Washington mostly lost the support network of junior officers on which any commander relies. His aides worked hard, but there were not enough of them. Some general officers—particularly Greene and Henry Knox—stood by Washington throughout the winter encampment and worked hard to help, but no one carried a heavier load than the commander in chief. A letter that Washington wrote in February to his fellow Virginian George Weedon, who was applying for a furlough, is especially revealing of the pressure he felt himself to be under:

It is matter of no small grief to me, to find such an unconquerable desire in the Officers of this Army to be absent from Camp, as every day exhibits; and my feelings upon the occasion are not a little wounded by perceiving that this passion is more prevalent among my country men, than in any other Troops in the whole Army--Mulenberg is now gone--you think it the hardest case imaginable that you are here--Woodford & Scott are also applying--the field Officers of all your Brigades are, in a manner, absent; a new arrangement of the army is taking place, and important changes (to effect which properly, the aid of every officer of Rank is necessary) is on the Carpet; and

yet, I must attempt (for it can be no more than an attempt) to do all these duties myself, and perform the part of a Brigadier--a Colonel--&c. (because in the absence of these every thing relative to their business comes directly to me) or, I must incur displeasure by the denial--I can see clearly that instead of having the proper Officers to assist in organizing, training, and fitting the Troops for the field against the next Campaign, that we shall be plunged into it as we were last year heels over head without availing ourselves of the advantages which might be derived from our present situation & prospects, if every Officer would lay his hands properly to the work, & afford those aids which I have a right to expect, and the Service requires instead of longing, & hankering after their respective homes.<sup>2</sup>

Unimpressed, Weedon left camp anyway and resigned shortly afterwards.

Washington was and is often derided for his lack of education. His skill as a military administrator, however, was based on intelligence, a remarkable ability to concentrate, and an eye for detail and organization. One need only study his administrative military correspondence or one of his meticulous plans for farming at Valley Forge to see what I mean. He had his deficiencies, of course, especially on the battlefield. My purpose here is not to resurrect the nineteenth-century view of Washington as an infallible man of steel. At the same time, I think any reassessment of Washington the general must take into account his efforts in the administration of an army that threatened several times to fall completely apart. He held the army together not through heroic virtue or his commanding personality, but through simple hard work. In this respect James Thomas Flexner was right to call him "the indispensable man."<sup>3</sup>

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I have used Valley Forge as an example of the kind of wider perception that a documentary editor can bring to military history. Any documentary editor could cite many other examples of how their work and training could be brought to bear in the field of military history. But to get back to the question with which I began this paper: What kind of historians are we? What do we have to do with the new social history of warfare? I think we can con-

<sup>2</sup>*The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series. Volume 13, December 1777-February 1778.* Edited by Edward G. Lengel (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 13:505-6.

<sup>3</sup>James Thomas Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man* (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1974).



tribute at many levels. One is to undertake comparatively small projects by editing the letters and diaries of private soldiers, nurses, civilians in wartime, and others. An amazing amount of this material still languishes unread in archives. Bringing it into the open through print or electronic publication is a truly noble task, and besides, research into the behavior of men and women in battle is one of the most fascinating and dynamic activities in military history today. Another way we can contribute to the new military history is to examine the papers of great military leaders, but with a twist, looking beyond their conduct in battle to see what role they played in the military organism as a whole.

Above all, we must remember that as documentary editors and military historians we have not just the ability but the duty to contribute to our field with scholarship that goes beyond mere editing. Already, I can hear two words coming: Julian Boyd. The last thing we need, or so goes the established wisdom, is for documentary editors to get uppity like Boyd and try to be scholars too. Who needs more of those scandalously long footnotes? Editors should concentrate on transcribing documents and leave interpretation to their betters! Once an admired historian, Boyd has become a bugbear that elder editors use to frighten their restive children. "Mommy, can I edit and write a book too?" squeaks a junior documentary editor oppressed by years of backbreaking tedium. "You wouldn't want the ghost of Julian Boyd to snatch you, would you dear?" comes the reply. "Now get back to your volume."

Take it from me: Julian Boyd is dead and buried. And at the risk of provoking a haunting I further dare to avow that his ghost doesn't exist. Whatever convention says, there is absolutely no reason why documentary editors should not seek and receive the time necessary to put their unique skills at the service of the historical profession. This need not mean multi-page footnotes; rather, every editor should be given leave—sabbaticals, if necessary—to write articles and monographs based on knowledge and skills gained through documentary editing. What better way to make our profession more rewarding and relevant in the twenty-first century? While we may not all be skilled writers—as I fear many will discover from my own books—documentary editors can indeed be historians, and have fun, too.