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## "What Good Are They Anyway?": A User Looks at Documentary Editions of Statesmen's Papers

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# “What Good Are They Anyway?”: A User Looks at Documentary Editions of Statesmen’s Papers

Daniel Feller

**H**istorical editing has come far in recent years. Editors now have their own organization; they have an ever-stricter set of standards and, as of this year, a handbook codifying those standards.<sup>1</sup> What was once an avocation has become a profession. Yet one cannot overlook that documentary editions have failed to meet some of the expectations first held out for them. The “bloodless revolution in American history” promised us a quarter-century ago from the publication of great statesmen’s papers has so far proved not only bloodless but undetectable.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, just as that revolution was being proclaimed, a very different—and far from bloodless—revolution in American historiography began to carry scholars away altogether from the kinds of concerns that could be effectively addressed through “the papers of great white men.”<sup>3</sup> Since then the wheel has turned once more, and a renewed appreciation of the ideological currents running through early American history has led us to look again at the words of the Founding Fathers, and to find new meaning in them.<sup>4</sup> But while the modern editions of statesmen’s papers have facilitated this resurgence of interest, they in no sense instigated it; indeed it is difficult to trace any significant historiographic trend to their direct influence. Stimulated by unforeseen developments both within and without the historical profession, our ways

<sup>1</sup>Mary-Jo Kline, *A Guide to Documentary Editing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

<sup>2</sup>Adrienne Koch, “The Historian as Scholar,” *The Nation* 195 (24 November 1962): 358.

<sup>3</sup>Jesse Lemisch, “The American Revolution Bicentennial and the Papers of Great White Men,” *AHA Newsletter* 9 (November 1971): 7–21.

<sup>4</sup>For instance, in Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order* (New York: New York University Press, 1984); and Ralph Ketcham, *Presidents Above Party* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984). It is noteworthy that all these authors had to rely at least in part on older editions because the modern series begun in the 1950s and intended to replace them had not yet reached completion.

of thinking about the past have evolved quite independently of the production schedules of documentary editions.

This was probably inevitable, and editors need not worry about it. The promise of immediately swaying scholarly trends through the mere publication of sources went unfulfilled because it was unrealistic to begin with. Yet, to their credit, editors have repeatedly voiced concern over the seeming irrelevance of their own enterprise to the main currents in American historiography. The failure of individuals and even of many libraries to purchase documentary editions (as evidenced by their small press runs), of journals to review them, and of historians to use them, has caused editors great consternation; so much that they are now considering whether the offer of a cash bribe (in the form of an annual prize for work based on the Founding Fathers editions) might excite more scholarly interest.<sup>5</sup>

But while editors continue to promote wider use of their work, they should also ask how to make that work more usable. They need to try looking at their editions from the user's point of view. In this respect the professionalization of documentary editing over the last generation has ironically furthered the isolation of editors from their historical brethren. Communication between editors and users has not increased; it has decreased. Having failed to get other historians' attention, editors have learned to converse mainly with each other, and to gear their volumes more to meet the critical demands of their fellow editors than to satisfy the needs of the public. Editing has become a kind of self-sustaining cottage industry—profitable, but outside the mainstream of historical scholarship.<sup>6</sup> This situation is not one that editors need feel responsible for; but it is one they can do something about. The first step is to return to basic principles. Editors need to remind themselves where they started and why, and what their essential purpose is.

President Harry Truman stated that purpose in his charge to the NHPC in

<sup>5</sup>Gregg L. Lint, "Documentary Reviewing Reviewed," *Newsletter of the Association for Documentary Editing* 2 (September 1980): 1–2; Carol Bleser, "The NHPRC Needs You," *OAH Newsletter* 15 (August 1987): 10. The prospect of a prize was discussed at the September 1986 ADE meeting in Charlottesville, Virginia; see *Documentary Editing* 8 (December 1986): 18.

<sup>6</sup>On the isolation of editors see Richard H. Kohn and George M. Curtis III, "The Government, the Historical Profession, and Historical Editing: A Review," *Reviews in American History* 9 (June 1981): 145–55. In this context I find puzzling and even alarming the clamor among editors for extended coursework and degree programs in documentary editing. Such training can only widen editors' separation from mainstream practitioners of what is supposed to be their real craft, not editing but history. The best preparation for editing is an extensive acquaintance with the subject matter. Techniques can be picked up in a short apprenticeship or two weeks at Camp Edit.

1950, which revitalized that agency and opened the way for the proliferation of editorial projects. As Truman said, the goal was “to make available to our people the public and private writings of men whose contributions to our history are now inadequately represented by published works.”<sup>7</sup> The words “to make available” run like a recurring refrain through the Commission’s subsequent reports to the president in 1951, 1954, 1963, and 1978. They define both a mission and a responsibility for historical editors.

What is that responsibility? First, to produce expeditiously. I did not say hastily. Careful editing takes time, and editors surely should take all the time they need to ensure the integrity and accuracy of the documents they publish. But delays beyond that are inadmissible. Federal support for these projects has been repeatedly justified on the basis of the public’s need to know, and if that justification is legitimate, then detours and embellishments that significantly extend a project’s publication schedule without contributing to its core function of making documents available cannot be defended.

Second, editors must present their documents in accessible form. This means continuing letterpress publication to the greatest extent that resources will allow. Comprehensive microfilms are invaluable to accompany letterpress editions, but they cannot replace them. Microforms are so unwieldy to use that even professional scholars avoid them wherever possible. The great convenience of a bound volume is that it makes it easy to scan oceans of material for the occasional document or paragraph or phrase touching on one’s special area of interest. (Detailed indexes, though useful, are not alone good substitutes for skimming.) Trying to read handwritten manuscripts on microfilm takes much longer, with less comprehension, more likelihood of error, and great consequent damage to one’s eyesight. These drawbacks of microfilm editions, added to their limited circulation and the cumbersomeness and expense of viewing machines, drastically curtail their usefulness, especially to lay readers.

Even in print, documents must be readable to be considered available. Here the responsibility of historical editors differs from that of literary editors. The latter perhaps need answer only to each other, or to a narrow audience of literary scholars, for their editorial practices. But editors of statesmen’s papers must answer to the public at large; for it is the public at large, acting through the NHPRC, that supports their projects, that in some cases initiated them, and that presumably benefits from them. No one benefits from indecipherable documents, no matter how faithful to the originals they are. Obviously, tampering

<sup>7</sup>*Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1950* (Washington: GPO, 1965), 417.

with the substance of a document to simplify it for readers is not desirable; but neither are historical editors at liberty to jettison the reader's convenience in their pursuit of the perfect text. Where best to strike the balance between the ease of the reader and the integrity of the document is, of course, a hard question, about which more later; but the responsibility to strike it has to be faced.<sup>8</sup>

Granted this summary view, from a user's perspective, of the goals of documentary editing, the next question is: how well are those goals being met? And what can editors do to improve their record in the future?

Publishing the great editions of statesmen's papers has taken far more time and space than anyone expected. In 1950, editor Julian Boyd of *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* projected a chronological run of at least forty volumes.<sup>9</sup> Thirty-seven years and twenty-two volumes later, the series has carried Jefferson's career only down to 1791; the last five volumes, taking more than two decades to produce, have advanced Jefferson's life less than two years. Still to come are his nine years as leader of the opposition to the Federalists, including two presidential campaigns; eight years as president, encompassing a huge mass of official documents; and seventeen years of retirement, during which Jefferson mainly stayed home and wrote letters.

Though the Jefferson Papers are often criticized on this score, other editions have not done much better. The Benjamin Franklin series is approaching the thirtieth anniversary of its inaugural volume with no end in sight. The James Madison Papers, a quarter-century after their first volume, are just now getting to the heart of Madison's career, his sixteen years as president and secretary of state. The much briefer James K. Polk and Andrew Johnson editions are both entering on their third decade of publication. *The Papers of Henry Clay*, which began publishing in 1959, are now hurtling toward completion within the originally planned ten volumes, but only at the cost of methodological overhauls that have seriously compromised the edition's uniformity.

It is, of course, unfair to complain about the length and duration of these editions *per se*. But it is fair to inquire after the cause, especially since some similarly conceived modern editions have managed to avoid bogging down in mid-career. The Woodrow Wilson Papers turn out two or three volumes a year. The Alexander Hamilton project wrapped up a twenty-six-volume edition in less

<sup>8</sup>G. Thomas Tanselle in "The Editing of Historical Documents," *Studies in Bibliography* 31 (1978): 1-56, argued that textual fidelity is the editor's only legitimate concern. Robert J. Taylor defended readability as a goal in "Editorial Practices—An Historian's View," *Newsletter of the Association for Documentary Editing* 3 (February 1981): 4-8.

<sup>9</sup>Julian Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 1: xiv-xv.

than twenty years of publication. What is even more noteworthy, indeed extraordinary, is how poorly the productivity of many current editions compares with that of their nineteenth- and early twentieth-century predecessors, despite the modern advantages of photocopying and computer word processing. Working without these timesavers, the nineteenth-century publishing house of Gales and Seaton produced thirty-eight massive volumes of congressional records (the *American State Papers*) at better than one per year; later the War Department turned out 128 volumes of Civil War records—the famous “O.R.”—in just over twenty years. Charles Francis Adams took only four years to publish twelve volumes of his father John Quincy’s diary. More recently, Worthington Ford’s *Journals of the Continental Congress* and Clarence Carter’s *Territorial Papers of the United States* produced about a volume per year. John C. Fitzpatrick published thirty-seven volumes of George Washington’s writings in just over a decade.

None of these editions were poorly planned or hastily executed. Every one of them is still a standard—indeed an essential—historical source, and every one adhered to a publication schedule that would make a modern editor drool with envy. With all their expertise and technology, why can’t today’s editors do as well? The answer comes back in two words: footnotes and summaries.

The call for leaner annotation of historical editions has often been sounded of late, but it deserves to be sounded again.<sup>10</sup> For although some editors have responded with fewer and shorter footnotes, others have offered resistance. The reasons, as will be explained later, are understandable. But the fact remains that volumes still appear bearing more annotation than either scholars or lay readers want or need.

Unfortunately the question of annotation is rarely phrased as it ought to be. The question is not really “Should we annotate?” Putting it that way implies that footnotes come free, as a kind of bonus that readers may or may not find attractive. But footnotes do not come free. They come at an enormous cost in space and time; and there is no editorial project which is, or ought to be, free from constraints on the space and time allotted to its work. In any selective edition—and even the so-called “comprehensive” editions are selective, summarizing or calendaring as many documents as they print—more footnotes mean fewer documents. The real question then is “Is this footnote worth more than a document?”

As for time, the amazing productivity of the great earlier editions is easily explained: they had no footnotes. Likewise, the most expeditious recent editions,

<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Tanselle (in “Editing of Historical Documents”, 43) dismissed criticism of excessive annotation as “essentially irrelevant or trivial” because it had “nothing to do with the quality of the editions themselves,” a judgment that could not be more wrong.

including Hamilton and Wilson, have held annotation to a minimum. The Jefferson Papers furnish perhaps the most telling example of what footnotes can do to a production schedule. For his first volume, Julian Boyd penned a classic argument for editorial restraint that ought to be quoted more often:

After considerable experimentation, the editors have been forced to the conclusion that exhaustive annotation of such a large mass of documents is not practicable and perhaps not desirable. However tempting it is to any editor of Jefferson's papers to explore the multitudinous bypaths that his letters invariably point to; to attempt to assay the historical significance of each document in relation to its context; to identify or explain all persons, events, and places; to separate fact from rumor; to explain obsolete, technical, and regional terms; to trace literary quotations to their sources; or to furnish references to pertinent literature, &c. —such a procedure would prolong the editorial task indefinitely, if not postpone its completion altogether. The editors construe their primary task as that of placing the whole body of Jefferson's writings in the hands of historians and of the public as expeditiously as can be done in view of the size and complexity of the undertaking and of the need for completeness and for scrupulous accuracy.<sup>11</sup>

Boyd proceeded to turn out fifteen volumes in nine years, an enviable record. Volume 16 was the first to contain lengthy editorial notes—and it took three years to produce. The next two volumes together were ten years in the making, and in the latter Boyd confessed that “editorial commentary” was “the principal but by no means the only cause of the regrettably long delay in the appearance of this volume.”<sup>12</sup> Extensive annotation at once multiplied production time by about fivefold and cut the chronological coverage of each volume in half. The combination was killing. Had the original plan been followed through, the series would now be nearing completion.

The urge to annotate has a way of creeping up on editors and devouring them, like some creature from a monster movie. “The Eggplant That Ate Chicago” finds its documentary counterpart in “The Footnote That Ate The Jefferson Papers.” By imperceptible degrees, editors who stay too long at their work progress from telling their readers only what they need to know to telling them everything they might want to know. But even editors who adhere to a more austere conception of their role—like the early Boyd—may underestimate the ability of readers to make sense of the documents without assistance.

What would happen if we had to find our way through the documents without footnotes to guide us? John Quincy Adams's diary bulges with unexplained

<sup>11</sup>*Jefferson Papers*, 1: xxxiii–xxxiv. Boyd's successor Charles T. Cullen signaled his return to Boyd's original practice by quoting this passage in the foreword to volume 22.

<sup>12</sup>*Jefferson Papers* 18: vii.

references to people, places, and events, many of them obscure; yet a century of scholars have used Charles Francis Adams's unannotated version without apparent difficulty. To a modern editor, the vast array of subjects mentioned in Andrew Jackson's correspondence seems to cry out for explication. Yet John Spencer Bassett's sparsely annotated six-volume Jackson remains a widely consulted standard source. Thousands of college freshmen every year read and understand Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* in a cheap unannotated edition. Lyman Butterfield's *The Book of Abigail & John*, a selection of Adams letters published in paperback and aimed at a general audience, has no footnotes.

What readers have been telling us through their actions, in other words, is that they do not really need all those footnotes. Likewise, I know of nothing to show that scholars *in practice* find sparsely annotated editions like Carter's and Ford's to be any less useful than heavily annotated ones. In my own research on the early nineteenth-century public land controversy, I consulted dozens of printed document collections, ranging from brief selections in journals to massive multivolume editions. Some were a century old and some were brand new; some had lots of annotation and others none at all. In no less than forty-eight of them I found documents that were of use to me. But nowhere did I find a footnote that told me something I didn't know and wanted to know. I did find, as scrupulous reviewers have had little difficulty in finding, inaccurate footnotes that would lead historians into serious error if accepted at face value. And no wonder. It is simply impossible for an editor to master every subject mentioned in his volumes well enough to write authoritative notes on them all, and the attempt to perform this unrealizable task diverts him from his real job of getting the documents out there. The identification of obscure individuals, the attribution of quotations and allusions, the exposition of background are all best left to the few specialists who may be interested and who command exactly the same facilities for research as the editor. As for the lay reader, a short essay introducing the volume or an occasional headnote providing narrative continuity is all he needs to comprehend everything of real importance in the documents without any annotation at all.<sup>13</sup>

Even if, by some superhuman effort, an editor were able to write notes accurately incorporating current knowledge on everything mentioned in his documents, those notes would be outmoded within a generation or two. Documents endure; historical scholarship does not. It is precisely *because* the older editions contain so little annotation that they have stood the test of time so well. The doc-

<sup>13</sup> Among current editions, the Calhoun Papers employ the introductory essay; Webster and Jackson the headnote. Annotation is light in all three.



uments are still useful. Had the editors adorned them with extensive footnotes, the relentless expansion and rising sophistication of historical knowledge would have long since turned their editions into museum pieces. The lesson of history is too clear to be ignored: if you want your work to last, hold down the notes. It is no coincidence that John Spencer Bassett's edition of Andrew Jackson's correspondence, containing little but documents, is still in everyday use; while his biography of Jackson was long ago superseded and consigned to the back shelves of a handful of libraries.

All of this was, or should have been, obvious to editors from the beginning. Why then, in the face of rising criticism from outside, have they clung so tenaciously to their footnotes? Perhaps in part out of frustration. Annotation offers scope for creativity, and a welcome diversion from the incredible tedium of transcription. It also gives the editor an opportunity to display the remarkable erudition and skill which his work really requires, but which otherwise remain hidden from public view. Deciphering illegible scrawls; correcting and attributing dates and names; choosing the most authoritative or important among versions of a document; reassembling fragmented or separated items; authenticating genuine documents and exposing spurious ones—*these* are the most vital tasks an editor performs, and they require great expertise. But it is the nature of editorial work, as it is of writing, that when done well it leaves little trace of the immense effort that went into it. Documentary editions are like fantastically complicated jigsaw puzzles; they all look easy once they're done. For the editor, annotating thus represents a chance to show his hand, display his erudition, and forestall the critic who wonders why it took him so long just to copy over a bunch of old letters. Given the near-anonymity in which editors work, the temptation to spread themselves a little in the notes is understandable; but it ought to be resisted. If, as editors often say, they are producing not just for the moment but for the long run, then they must seek their rewards over the long haul. Years after most of their contemporaries have been forgotten, Worthington Ford, Charles Francis Adams, and Clarence Carter are still household names among historians and their volumes are still in daily use, which is all the reward an editor could ask. To achieve the same enduring fame, today's editors need only follow their example.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Editors sometimes invoke an "obligation" to pass on to the public all the information they amassed while assembling their volumes. The public can best judge for itself the obligations due it. The consistent call from funding agencies and reviewers representing the public is for less annotation, not more. One may therefore greet with skepticism an editor's unsubstantiated claim of an "obligation" to do what he really wants to do anyway.

The urge to annotate is the editor's first great occupational weakness; the second is the temptation to summarize documents. In their second volume the Jefferson Papers began inserting summaries of minor documents into the body of the text, and their example has since been followed by, among others, the Calhoun, Clay, and Polk editions. These summaries often contain quotations, sometimes only a word or two, in order to adhere as closely as possible to the language of the originals. In editions where the hero held a government office generating lots of administrative correspondence, summaries have become so numerous as to overwhelm the documents, resulting in volumes that function more as expanded calendars than as collections of letters.<sup>15</sup>

Have any of the editors who employ these summaries thought clearly about what purpose they are supposed to serve? The truth is they serve none—or rather, they serve no purpose that justifies the enormous amount of space they consume, sometimes hundreds of pages in a single volume. I think one would search in vain for a historian who has gained any benefit from a long summary that he could not have derived from a one- or two-sentence calendar entry. Anyone interested enough to read a multiparagraph synopsis of a document wants to see the original. And summaries interspersed through the body of a volume undermine its usefulness in other ways. Besides eating up space that ought to be devoted to documents, they ruin the volume's physical appearance by requiring additional typefaces, and destroy its continuity and readability and hence its literary value. A volume of correspondence without summaries or footnotes reads like a disjointed but fascinating epistolary novel. An edition stuffed with summaries and notes reads like a manuscript dealer's catalogue. Is it any wonder that documentary editors have lost their popular audience?

Editors would do well to reserve the body of their volumes solely for documents printed in full, and confine all others to a calendar appended at the back or published separately. Among its other benefits, this would impose a salutary restraint on editorial verbosity. Where space is at a premium—as it always is—there is no excuse for long-winded summaries that convey nothing but editorial undiscipline. At a recent Camp Edit, one speaker showcased a summary of a letter to appear in a forthcoming volume. The summary, including three footnotes, is nearly half as long as the letter. Instead of stating the letter's contents, which could have been done well in two sentences, the summary paraphrases it, point by point, including two quotations—one of two words, the other of five,

<sup>15</sup>See, for example, volumes 2–9 of *The Papers of John C. Calhoun* covering his service as secretary of war (1817–25), and volumes 4–7 of *The Papers of Henry Clay* spanning his tenure as secretary of state (1825–29).

both useless. This kind of self-indulgence suits no purpose; it merely wastes space.

If editors will not voluntarily refrain from such excesses, publishers should impose a calendar format that forces them to dispose of items unselected for printing in concise descriptions of no more than a sentence or two. The published calendars of the Martin Van Buren and John Jordan Crittenden papers in the Library of Congress furnish good models to start from.

On the subject of transcription, to advocate modernizing or expanding or standardizing texts could only jeopardize one's credibility. In the wake of G. Thomas Tanselle's famous blast against such practices, editors have reached an essential consensus on the goal of literal transcription, though they may still disagree on mechanics. On these technical questions—for instance, how to handle nonstandard and nonfunctional punctuation, sub- and superscriptions, and interlineations and deletions—there are no magic formulas. But a few observations may be in order.

First, if the final result, the printed document, is not more readable than the manuscript original, then the whole editorial function is pointless; we might just as well have photographic facsimiles. To those who would decry any alteration of the original, perhaps citing Tanselle's dictum that "if one seriously wishes to understand a text, whatever it is, no aspect of it can be slighted," one can only suggest a change of profession.<sup>16</sup> Printing a manuscript *changes* it, for instance by obliterating such features of the original as the slope and steadiness of the writer's hand, the size and configuration of his letters, or the flourish on his signature. Reshaping—in other words, changing—texts for publication is the editor's job, and finding a wider audience for them is his announced and only legitimate goal. Abandoning readability as a criterion destroys the very rationale for the editorial enterprise, and thus enmeshes the editor in inescapable contradictions.

Second, editors should realize that they care far more about these technical matters than users do, and indeed the very concern editors lavish on them reflects the extent to which they communicate nowadays with each other instead of with their public. Should superscriptions be brought down, ampersands expanded, periods supplied, meaningless dashes omitted, and complimentary closings deleted or run onto the last line? Readers don't care. As late as 1981, *after* Tanselle's challenge and partly in response to it, the historian Gordon Wood defended Julian Boyd's expanded method of rendering Jefferson's letters on the practical ground that they were easier to read that way, and that "for historians,

<sup>16</sup>Tanselle, "Editing of Historical Documents," 46.

convenience of use apparently overrides their concern for literal accuracy.” Wood even predicted that historical editors would reject Tanselle’s imperatives and continue to present documents “in a highly readable form” so that historians could “go through them much more rapidly.”<sup>17</sup> Today, most editors would spurn an argument so boldly based on the user’s expediency as a shocking surrender of editorial principle. But to working historians such accommodations make sense. Unlike editors, they are accustomed to functioning in an imperfect world. They know that *all* the sources they use, of whatever kind, are incomplete or unreliable or distorted in some way or another; and they further understand that even if the documentary record on any subject were authoritative and complete, they would not have time to consult it all. Hence they make do with what they have. Knowing that an extra hour spent puzzling out a difficult document means an hour lost somewhere else—another document unread, a collection unconsulted—most historians would gladly sacrifice a bit of literalness for greater ease of use. To them it matters little that the Daniel Webster and Henry Clay projects printed the same letter with forty-two minor discrepancies in transcription between them, or that one standard source, Gales and Seaton’s *Register of Debates in Congress*, exists in two slightly different versions.<sup>18</sup> Historians make all the time, because they must, a judgment that editors today shudder to make at all—a judgment of what is significant in a document and what is not. As long as two versions of a letter or a speech are *essentially* identical—as long as they say the same thing in the same words—scholars and lay readers alike generally find them both equally serviceable.

Editors might regard such an impure attitude toward the sources as rank heresy, but they ignore it at their peril. Because for whose benefit, if not for these same readers, are editors working? We return again to the core purpose of historical editing, to “make available” the documentary record of American history. Though editors need not always submit to their readers’ desires, they should at least consult and consider them—more, I think, than they do at present. Why, for instance, should historical editors be immune from the prepublication peer review required of historical monographs and CSE-approved editions? Careful, systematic vetting would at the least restrain editorial excesses and catch the

<sup>17</sup>Gordon S. Wood, “Historians and Documentary Editing,” *Journal of American History* 67 (March 1981): 874–75.

<sup>18</sup>Webster to Clay, 4 April 1831, in *The Papers of Daniel Webster: Correspondence*, 3: 106–8 and *The Papers of Henry Clay*, 8: 330–32. There are twenty-two variations in Webster to Clay of 25 March 1827, and nineteen in Clay to Webster of 27 August 1832. Such discrepancies are so frequent, even among the most recent and painstaking editions, as to call in question the very attainability of literal transcription.

occasional gross errors of transcription and annotation that creep into even the most scrupulous editions. Another way to breach the barrier between editors and users—one that would benefit both sides—would be for major projects to sign on appropriate field specialists for temporary duty as consulting editors. These outside scholars could offer fresh viewpoints, anticipate post-publication criticisms, and guard against editorial tunnel vision. They could, in short, fill the intended function of the generally moribund editorial advisory boards.

Editors sometimes seek to escape criticism on utilitarian grounds by pleading a higher obligation to preserve documents for future generations. One doubts that future generations of readers will feel the constraints of time, patience, and eyesight any less than the present one does. But even if they will, editors have no business sacrificing the genuine needs of current users for the problematic needs of future ones. We don't know what historians will want a century hence, but we know what they want now. If serving future generations was really the main purpose of documentary editions, then letterpress publication ought to be suspended immediately, since books as we know them will become obsolete long before the three-hundred-year shelf life of NHPRC-sponsored editions expires. Books serve the here and now, and so should editors. Who knows? If they render their documents faithfully, practice restraint in annotation, and produce their volumes with reasonable dispatch, their work just might—like that of Adams, Carter, and Ford—stand the test of time after all.