THE EDITING AND PUBLISHING OF DOCUMENTS

by

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In 1958, Mr. Farley Mowat published Coppermine Journey, an account of a great adventure, selected from the Journals of Samuel Hearne. In his foreword, Mr. Mowat comments on Dr. J.B. Tyrrell's edition of Hearne published by the Champlain Society. He says that it "was designed to preserve Hearne's relics with the full rites of scholarship, and not to give the rest of us free intercourse with a man imprisoned by our forgetfulness." He continues, "Not that I am belittling scholarship, as such. On the contrary, the exhumation of old bones and their assembly into some sort of order is an honourable and a useful task. My quarrel is with the fiction that the past is all old bones; for by giving assent to this fallacy we sanction the burial of our own greatness and we encourage the pedants and the historical dilettantes in the delusion that they alone are qualified to walk in the cemetery of our years... Nor do I shrink at becoming a vandal in the sacred graveyard of the historians... I have dealt ruthlessly with the funereal traditions of the academic method. I have utterly dispensed with the usual learned scaffolding of footnotes and appendices, preferring to believe that Hearne is more than capable of telling his own tale. I have taken what may well be considered outrageous liberties with the original text, by rearranging and abridging the material, and by considerable modification of the eighteenth-century syntax, punctuation, phraseology and spelling, in order to remove some of the impediments which the years have placed between the reader and the author..."

On the face of it, Mr. Mowat would seem to have a point. But boiled down, what do his fine phrases mean? They mean simply that the editor has resigned all responsibility for elucidation of the text, on the grounds that the original writer is "more than capable of telling his own tale", even though that writer was presumably writing for eighteenth century readers, with a radically different knowledge and background from the modern Everyman for whom Mr. Mowat feels so much concern. On the other hand, Mr. Mowat felt it necessary in essence to rewrite the original. Hearne, probably the clearest and crispest writer in his field, was, in the end, not allowed to tell his own tale.

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In the last century, bowdlerizing, or improving on the original, was a common method in publishing historical documents. The original manuscript of Franchère's "Journal d'un voyage, sur la côte du Nord oest de l'amèrique septentrionale, pendant les années 1811, 12, 13, & 14", now in the Toronto Public Library, has been much amended and embellished by Michel Bibaud, the editor of its first publication in 1820. M. Bibaud fortunately used a different ink than Franchère, and his handwriting is also quite different. I doubt if anyone would defend this method now. Unfortunately, the reaction to this type of thing has been just as irritating, if not as seriously misleading. We all know those publications bristling with square brackets, and sics, and fatuous and unnecessary footnotes which add nothing to the text, but show the erudition of the editor.

The duty of the editor, then, is to present the original document exactly as it was written. At the same time, he is responsible for making its meaning and significance clear, without undue intrusion between the original writer and the reader. It is not easy.

The task can be divided into two main divisions - transcription and editing. In transcription, the first thing the editor must do is to decide on his ground rules. We would probably agree that in scholarly publication, the basic rule should be to copy exactly, adding or deleting nothing without clearly indicating what has been done. If for any reason this rule is broken, the editor must state plainly what changes have been made. The changes must be consistent. For a book intended for popular consumption, it might be permissible to modernize spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, expand abbreviations, and introduce modern paragraph divisions, to increase ease of reading. If this is done, the editor must be very careful not to change meaning, and must indicate in his preface what he has done. This method is fraught with difficulties - the editor is operating on a very thin line between justifiable clarifying, and unjustifiable tinkering with the text. In the present state of Canadian historical scholarship, when so little primary source material has been published, we should perhaps concentrate on exact reproduction, and let Mr. Mowat's Everyman take his chance. I am not sure, anyway, that the editor who tries to simplify the reading of his text is not underestimating Everyman's ability. Those of us who work in libraries or archives are probably aware of how much the intelligent but untrained student can assimilate from difficult documents.

Exact copying involves a fair amount of hack work. For example, Peter Russell's secretary spelt accommodation with one 'm'. The editor carefully copies the mistake. His copy goes to the typist, who is a good typist, and can spell. She automatically types two 'm's. The editor corrects, or rather uncorrects the typescript. It goes to the typesetter, who is a good typesetter, and can spell. He automatically sets two 'm's. The galleys come back to the editor, who once more deletes the second 'm'. He is lucky if there is not another step, when the publisher's proofreaders, who are good proofreaders and can spell, once again introduce the second 'm'. However, the patient insistence of the editor finally wins, and it is known for all time that a nameless secretary misspelt accommodation.

This sort of insistence is perilously close to pedantry when concerned with such minutae - but what about many and gross misspellings, which show the background and education of the writer? What about proper names, where misspelling can indicate pronunciation; personal names, where misspelling can indicate the degree of acquaintance between the writer and the person to whom he refers; place names, where misspelling sometimes indicates the origin and meaning of the name? Consistent misspelling can sometimes provide a clue to identify the author of an unsigned document. Even the way a writer spells the or/our words - labour, harbour, and the rest - can be significant. And can the editor be sure with a badly misspelled word, what word the writer intends? On the whole, it would seem safer to leave spelling alone, using a brief footnote if the spelling is too remote from modern usage.

Punctuation and sentence division is a more complicated problem. Misspellings may slow down or distract the modern reader, but pages of unpunctuated or extremely erratically punctuated text will bring him to a full stop. Punctuation has always been an individual thing; even the modern educational system - did you learn the 16 uses of the comma in high school? - has not succeeded in completely standardizing it. There have always been writers who used one mark only in long hand - the dash. There have been writers who use no punctuation at all, or writers that seem to use some mystic mathematical formula - a period after every five words, for example. If the editor decides that his text should be punctuated, he must be very careful not to alter the meaning. This is sometimes difficult. An "if" clause lies between two main clauses; attaching it firmly to one gives one meaning, and shifting the period gives another. Incidentally, punctuation in square brackets, as in the Arthur Papers is not the answer; it is as distracting as no punctuation at all.

Abbreviations create another problem. There are those which are ambiguous, like Com. which could be committee, commission, or company. There are those symbols which the modern press no longer uses. In Canadian documents these are mercifully few, but there are some, like the odd capital 'P' for 'per'. And is it really necessary to use superior letters, with the added expense and nuisance to the typesetter?

Capitalization is another difficulty when printing manuscripts. In print, there is unfortunately no such thing as a semi-capital. When in doubt, it would seem sensible to follow modern usage. Even when not in doubt, capitalizing the first word in sentences would also seem justified, again with an explanation.

I have left to the last the greatest stumbling-block of all in the path of the copyist - downright illegibility. My bêtes noir - Powell, Sydenham, Simcoe, the Baldwins - may not be the same as yours, but all of us working with manuscripts know the frustration of coming to a word that is impossible to read - and curse the fate which usually makes it a word of some importance. In a Sydenham letter of 1840, in which Sydenham is discussing political manoeuvring before the election, is he discussing the chances of Boulton or Baldwin? There is a 'B' at the beginning, an 'n' at the end, and two high letters in the middle. There is a considerable difference. Given this situation, what the editor does <u>not</u> do, is guess. When nothing can be made of a word, either by careful comparison with other words in the same handwriting, or by a photographic enlargement, he either uses the word 'illegible' in square brackets, or follows the older practice of representing each letter with an asterisk. The latter method has the advantage of allowing him to give any letters in the word he can decipher, but often what he is struggling with is a meaningless squiggle incapable of division into letters. If possible, the editor also supplies in square brackets any words or parts of words missing because of mutilation, as in letters when careless opening has torn part of the manuscript around the seal.

The editor now has an accurate transcription of the document he wishes to publish. It is his duty to supply for the reader the information necessary for his complete understanding of its contents and its significance. Many documents, of course, need no editorial comment, beyond identifying the writer and the circumstances under which the document was written, and even this is often inherent in the document itself. Other documents are undated, unsigned, and full of oblique but important references that must be clarified.

The problems connected with dating are familiar ones, whether we are publishing documents or not. The best source of information is of course the document itself. References in it to events, persons, former letters, even the weather, can be helpful. Often the date can be deduced from the most unimportant and casual comment - the 'give my love to Mary' sort of thing. The paper and ink can give a rough idea of the date. So can the watermark, although the only positive fact to be learned from it is the earliest possible date. Paper was often used years after it was made; in some of the Upper Canadian government offices, for example, paper watermarked in the 1820's was used well into the 1840's. The position of the document in an undisturbed file can be useful. Some writers and recipients keep a rough record of letters sent or received. Without corroboration, however, this kind of evidence cannot be accepted as complete proof of date. Any date the editor supplies, both those for which he can produce positive authority, and those which belong to the informed guess variety, should be in square brackets, with a brief footnote explaining the author's reasons for it.

The majority of Canadian documents are of a later date than the adoption of the New Style Calendar, by France in 1582, and by England in 1752. The most sensible rule when publishing the earlier documents would seem to be to leave the dates alone if all Old Style, but if working with documents in which some are one and some the other, for example in a compilation of French and English documents of the first half of the eighteenth century, it would seem necessary to translate the Old Style dates, in square brackets, or footnotes.

Identifying the writer of an unsigned document can usually be done by comparison of handwriting. However, when an unsigned document is written in the standardized hand of a secretary or clerk, the problem is more difficult, and can only be solved by internal evidence. Since with most documents identification of the writer is vital for an intelligent reading of them, the editor must use all his knowledge of the subject, and his detective ability to solve the problem. A wrong reference can distort the whole significance and meaning. For example, in the Durham Papers in the Public Archives, there is an undated and unsigned draft of a proposed federal union of British North America, with pencil comments in another hand very critical of the plan. An early, and great, scholar, identified the comments as being in Lord Durham's handwriting. He was unable to identify the original author of the draft, or to date it. In the Arthur Papers in the Toronto Public Library, there is another copy in a different hand, but with the same pencil comments. The Toronto version is endorsed, "Copy from Earl of Durham Send C.J." - Chief Justice John Beverley Robinson. Also in the Arthur Papers is a letter from Robinson to Arthur dated July 27, 1838, in which he wrote, "I have as nearly as my memory would serve me made the same notes upon your Copy of "the Scheme" as upon Lord Durham's and in about as legible a hand - His Lordship, I fear, is losing much valuable time - by abstaining from discussing & considering any other than this one project, which I do not think it likely will be carried upon any principle, & which if carried upon the principles proposed, would assuredly be ruinous to these Colonies-" A careful comparison of the handwriting of the comments of the two documents establishes that the critic of the plan was not Durham, but Robinson. It would seem to be a safe assumption that the plan itself was either Durham's own, or sponsored by him - exactly the reverse of the earlier judgment, based on a mistaken identification of handwriting. The editor, however, does not flatly state that it is by Durham and criticized by Robinson; he explains the process of reasoning that led him to this conclusion.

This document brings up another editorial problem. Many important documents exist in various forms. A letter from Simcoe to the Duke of Portland, for example, can be found in the Simcoe Papers in the Public Archives of Ontario, as a draft, heavily amended, in Simcoe's handwriting. It can also be found in the same collection, copied by a clerk in Simcoe's letterbooks. The letter received by Portland is found in the Public Records Office, in the CO42 series. If it deals with matters of concern to other government departments, copies made by Portland's staff will be found in other British official files. A copy is in the Q Series in the Public Archives of Canada. A printed version appears in E.A. Cruikshank's edition of the Simcoe Papers. Each one of these varies. Which copy does the editor use? First of all, he eliminates the printed version, in this case particularly unreliable, because in most cases Cruikshank was copying from copies made in 1881, when exact transcription was not insisted upon. On the same grounds, he ignores the Q Series version. He can then eliminate the copy in the Simcoe letterbooks, and any contemporary copies made in England, on the grounds that they are supposed to be exact transcripts, and any variation is because of a clerk's carelessness. Any additional comments on these copies, however, should be included. The editor is left with two choices - the draft letter as originally written by Simcoe, and the letter signed by Simcoe and received by Portland. The draft is important, because it shows the evolution of Simcoe's thought, It is also important, because Simcoe's secretary had considerable difficulty reading his chief's writing, and Simcoe did not always check the final version carefully when he signed it. In one letter Simcoe wrote of an additional argument - this was copied as an additional regiment, probably causing considerable mystification. On the other hand, the letter as received is also important - in this case it could be of value to know that it was thought that Simcoe was asking for more troops. Such variations, however, would not seem to justify the publication of both versions. One or other should be chosen, depending on its relative importance, with significant variations from the other - not commas and capitals - noted in square brackets or footnotes. And it should be clearly stated which version the editor is using. Emendations in the draft should also be indicated - again not commas or capitals, or even corrections of typographical errors, or minor changes obviously for literary reasons. Changes to tone down an argument, or to add emphasis to it, changes which add information, or subtract it, should always be given. If there are very many of them, the use of square brackets in the text to give the alternate reading, as in the Arthur Papers, tends to cut up the original document too much; footnotes would be better. Changes made by other than the original author, should also be recorded, if important.

In many cases, the editor does not have this wide choice of version. Sometimes, he has only a copy of the document, the accuracy of which he must evaluate. A contemporary copy could be carelessly done, or could be purposely changed for unscrupulous reasons. It could be a complete forgery. The editor should be suspicious of all contemporary copies, and with his knowledge of the subject, should be able to question doubtful copies. Internal evidence, plus the source of the document, is his guide here. With later copies, every attempt should be made to locate the original. It is only by going back to it that the editor can be sure that his transcription is exact. For example, in a militia list for York County in 1798, in the D.W. Smith Papers, the last entry is "A German". This officer, not yet appointed, was to be associated with a company of German settlers in Markham Township. This list was first copied by Mr. John Ross Robertson, who did a tremendous service to local history in the Toronto area, but whose transcriptions are often extremely inaccurate. From Robertson's version, there have been a number of reprints, until, in the latest one, this officer emerges as Lt. Algernon, whom the editor is - understandably - unable to identify.

The next task the editor faces, is to illuminate obscure or difficult passages in the documents. Dr. Sanderson, editor of the Arthur Papers, wrote, "Every attempt has been made in the transcription to present the papers themselves without undue editorial interference. Footnote comment has been deliberately kept to a minimum, the principle being not to attempt to supply information which was as readily available to the reader as it was to the editor." In theory this is probably sound - the pointless regurgitating of standard reference works in footnotes can probably be classed as editorial interference. On the other hand, unless the reader is as familiar with the subject and period as the editor, he will constantly have to refer to these same standard works as he reads the documents. It is much easier for him to have brief biographical notes and summaries of events supplied by the editor, and it is much easier for the editor, who is familiar with the subject and its related sources, to supply such needed information than it is for the reader to locate it.

If we accept the premise that editorial responsibility includes elucidation of the text, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the editor must supply explanatory material, both in the form of footnotes to clarify specific points, and in the form of an introduction, to explain the meaning and significance of the collection as a whole.

Footnotes should be used to give information about persons mentioned in the documents - not necessarily a full biographical sketch, but enough to identify clearly the person referred to and to explain his significance at the time the document was written. They should be used to give background information; for example, a single, casual reference to the return of the posts to the United States in 1796 requires a brief reference to the Treaty of Versailles and Jay's Treaty, and a list of the posts involved. If, however, this question is thoroughly dealt with in the documents, there is no reason to summarize the same information in the footnotes. Footnotes should clarify oblique references to persons or events; letters between two contemporaries assume a knowledge on the part of their reader that modern readers do not possess. His contemporaries would recognize the Hyena as Sir Francis Hincks; a modern student might be baffled. Footnotes should be used to complete an account which the document leaves half-told; a reference to the proposed founding of a school, for example, requires mention of its subsequent history, if any. And footnotes should be used, judiciously, to correct errors of fact in the document. Here the editor is on shaky ground. He must be very sure that the document is wrong, before he attempts to correct it. Small errors - dates, places, etc. - present no difficulty, and should be corrected in footnotes. But what about pages of complete misstatement and misrepresentation? All the editor can do here, is to indicate where accurate statements can be found, and briefly summarize them. If he attempts to correct this sort of thing in detail and in full, he will find that his footnotes are longer than his document, and unnecessarily intrude upon the reader's understanding of it.

The whole question of footnotes is a delicate one. The editor must avoid, on one hand, leaving his documents obscure and difficult to interpret, and on the other, jumping up and down joggling his reader's elbow with unnecessary insistence and force. It is probably better to err in the latter way. The reader has, after all, the ultimate defence against the editor, of refusing to read his editorializing.