

ASPECTS OF RECORDS PUBLICATION

by

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Since at least the early 17th century, when Sir Robert Cotton was suspected of augmenting his monumental library by pilfering manuscripts from the Tower of London, there has been an intermittent dispute between researchers and archivists concerning the primary function of a keeper of records. Certainly mere acquisition was one of Sir Robert's motives, but his proprietary interest in his own collection was not so highly developed as to preclude the lending of unique and valuable manuscripts to such contemporary historians as Bacon, Camden and Speed. Widespread utilization of knowledge about the past was (charitably considered) Cotton's immediate objective in smuggling out documents under his cloak. It is in the similar sense of the general dissemination of historical materials that I propose to deal with records publication. Most of what I have to say will be predicated upon my experience in British archives but it will, I hope, have relevance for North American scholars.

Few historians would challenge Roger Ellis' definition of the two-fold duties of the archivist - to preserve records and to make them available for reference or study. He maintains the primacy of the conservative function although he admits that "to the student or searcher it will no doubt often seem that . . . the archivist should give all his attention to providing bigger and better search rooms and more and more detailed lists and indexes."

My sympathies are with the searchers because the preservation of documents can rarely be an end in itself. I do not mean to discount the importance of accumulating, classifying and preserving archival materials, but to a historian it seems as if the publication of manuscript sources is in danger of being relegated to a secondary position. Undoubtedly the cost of printing - the economic factor - is the main deterrent to publication, but the increasing volume of records, the lack of competent editors and the variety of demands made by researchers occasion grave doubts about the advisability of continuing the serial publications originated in the 19th Century. Now, more than ever, there appears to be a discrepancy between the utility of a publication and the cost of its preparation.

In the 18th Century, scholarly works were underwritten by private subscription or patronage endowments; in the 19th Century increasing reliance was placed upon governmental support and, in England, after the passage of the Record Office Act in 1838 and the establishment of the Historical Manuscript Commission in 1869, public funds subsidized the bulk of source publications. Nevertheless, even in this era of relatively low costs, a considerable number of private societies, e.g. the Parker, Camden, Selden, Thoresby, Surtees, Percy and Holbein Societies, commissioned the publication of manuscript materials in specific areas of interest not dealt with by public agencies. By the 20th Century many of these organizations were defunct, and

those which survived had often had recourse to other sources of financial aid.

Today we rely upon public organizations, county historical and archaeological societies, university presses and privately endowed foundations to satisfy the increasing demands of a wide variety of historians. Yet all of them, including government, are in the process of re-assessing their publications policy. The preparation of a single volume calendar by the Public Record Office involves the expenditure of thousands of pounds and two to three years of effort by the editor and his assistants, yet fewer than 200 copies are likely to be distributed in the United Kingdom, the Dominions and the United States. The limited appeal of a Calendar of Feet of Fines or of Inquisitions Post Mortem undoubtedly justifies the hesitancy of the Keeper of the Public Records in undertaking publications of this kind. Even the market for less specialized calendars reprinted by the Kraus organization has failed to live up to the optimistic estimates of that company although they were based upon a survey of projected library expansion in the U.S.

The Historical Manuscripts Commission has also been adversely affected by a limited market and rising costs. The folio reports of the late 19th Century were sold at approximately 5 shillings; today's octavos cost about five pounds. University presses have curtailed publication of source editions even more drastically. In the 1930's, for instance, Yale projected the publication of the corpus of parliamentary diaries extant for the period from 1624 to 1629. The project died for lack of funds, was resurrected in the late 1950's and transferred to California where it languished until it was recently restored to its original home to await the necessary capital.

Apart from the problems occasioned by the cost factor, the archivist's involvement in the publication of edited manuscripts is limited by the priorities of his profession. The staggering increase in records' accumulation since the First World War and the demands made by searchers have necessitated a distinction between the service and scholarly functions of the archivist - often to the detriment of the latter. The question of whether or not the archivist should also be a professional historian has been hotly, but inconclusively, debated. Historians, I think, generally agree that some historical training is desirable in order to enable the archivist to anticipate the needs of that segment of the scholarly community with which he is most intimately concerned. Moreover, if the initiative to edit and publish manuscripts is increasingly referred to individuals other than the professional archivists, I think we may anticipate an appreciable decline in the volume of source publications. During its early years, when archivists were actively involved in editing the **American Historical Review**, that journal devoted a portion of most issues to the printing of significant primary material. Now the source has been superseded by the book review.

If areas of tension exist between the historian and the archivist many of them are due to the archivist's inability to keep pace with the changing demands of historians. Printed calendars which satisfied the needs of researchers into political, military, constitutional and diplomatic affairs are manifestly inadequate for the historians of social

phenomena, economic conditions, intellectual attitudes and scientific developments. Admittedly there is no substitute for original documents, but historians have increasingly demanded verbatim reports rather than cryptic, general calendar references. For example, half a century ago the Historical Manuscripts Commission editors would have calendared a nomination letter as follows:

“Nov. 10, 1620 The Earl of Southampton to the Corporation of Andover recommending candidates for election to the forthcoming parliament.”

Confronted with this reference the frustration of the historian of parliamentary patronage is comparable to the agonies suffered by Tantalus. More recent calendars would certainly note the names of the prospective M.P.'s and would probably print the letter completely.

Archivists and historians who are convinced of the value of primary research have already made valiant efforts to circumvent inadequate calendars and the high costs of publication and travel by making use of photography and xerography. Valuable acquisition of microfilms of public and private collections have been made by the Public Archives of Canada, the Folger Library, the British Museum and other institutions, but perhaps costs could be lowered and utilization of the films increased by adding to the number of subscribers. To have films of the Salisbury manuscripts on deposit in the British Museum avoids some inconvenience for the Marquess, but not much for the scholar from North America.

The principle of the consortium (so termed by Mr. Williams, Keeper of the Public Records) has been promoted by Prof. Barnes at the University of California as a valuable aid to graduate studies. He has urged his western colleagues in British history to subscribe a portion of their library budget to the annual acquisition of microfilms of various classes of public records.

One of the earliest and most influential exponents of microphotography was Sir Hilary Jenkinson. It was his conviction that the publication of descriptive lists and indexes, combined with the use of photography, would best serve the needs of the “student at a distance.” Under the aegis of Prof. Elton of Cambridge University, and with the cooperation of the Public Record Office, the List and Index Society has been formed thus implementing, at least partially, Sir Hilary's recommendations.

By making accessible to scholars records which were formerly available only to searchers on the premises, microphotography has already proved to be of invaluable service to historians. Nevertheless, if printed calendars and collections are to be replaced by microfilm and lists and indexes new problems will confront historians and archivists alike.

Ernst Posner regards the widespread use of microphotography as entailing a “final break with the archivist's proprietary attitude toward his records, a democratization of the archival reference service that constitutes an entirely new departure.” Some archivists regard with alarm even a partial loss of their control over access to their manuscript collections and predict dire results from the popularization

of research. Historians are apt to adopt a less pessimistic point of view and contend that the risks of ignorant or improper use of archival materials are outweighed by the stimulus to scholarly research. I, for one, find it difficult to subscribe to the opinion that an inferior work spoils the market for a good book - I am inclined to support the obverse of the statement.

Apart from the possible perils involved in the increasing use of photographic reproductions is the added responsibility this technique imposes on the archivist. If useful lists and indexes are to be prepared some canons of procedure must be formulated. The problem of manuscript description, whether individually or by class, must be solved. The constant process of reclassification should be minimized; a hand-list is of little use if its references no longer apply. Major migrations of manuscripts should be publicized in the appropriate historical journals and lists and indexes should be given the widest circulation. The historian who has searched for the same manuscript cited four different ways, or attempted to follow its progress through the auction galleries, or finally located it in a unique unpublished catalog compiled by a local archivist will second my plea for the assignment of highest priority to the production of adequate finding aids and will insist upon greater co-operation between public and private agencies, archivists and historians.

But if the use of microphotography entails added responsibilities for the archivist it also demands an adjustment in the attitude of the historian. Without the institution of intensive graduate studies in paleography, languages and research techniques direct reproduction of the manuscript sources will be of little use to the student in many cases. This could tend to restrict archival research to the more affluent universities where adequate training is available. Such a contingency must be avoided at all costs and expanding research into new areas of inquiry must be promoted.

Moreover, the contributions made by editors to historical scholarship should be more generally recognized by the profession. All too often editorial work is regarded as the proper function of the pedestrian historian, and few indeed are the editors who achieve international recognition for their services. Yet the work of a skilled editor is apt to outlive the productions of an interpretive historian by generations.

It is my conviction that solid historical reputations are forged in the archives and I join with Maurice Bond, Clerk of the Records of the House of Lords, in lamenting the fact that "individual record offices find their closest links not with the professional historian, for whose service they were in so large part designed, but with the genealogist, the antiquary and the general reader."