ESSAY REVIEW

Franklin at Twenty-Five: A Review of Volumes 1-25 of The Papers of Benjamin Franklin

The twenty-fifth volume of The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, covering Franklin’s life from October 1, 1777, to February 28, 1778, was published by the Yale University Press in October 1986. Twenty-five more volumes, the editors estimate, will be needed to complete the work. The midpoint of the series is an occasion to reflect on its evolution and influence and to ask questions which may have no satisfactory answers.

A lover and inventor of animal fables, Franklin would have been delighted by the circumstances which gave birth to the Papers, for they were the product of rivalry between the bear and the eagle, the tiger and the bulldog. The first volume of a “modern” documentary edition, The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, edited by Julian P. Boyd and published by the Princeton University Press, was presented to President Harry S Truman in 1950 at a period when the Cold War was turning hot in Korea. Menaced by communism, American leaders cast about for ways to strengthen the national commitment to democracy. In the publication of the papers of the nation’s founders, President Truman perceived one such instrument and, therefore, in 1950 he directed the National Historical Publications Commission to devise plans to “make available to the general public” the writings of the nation’s statesmen and heroes. In reporting to the president on May 21, 1951, the Commission agreed that “publications of this character give added strength and inspiration to the people of the United States in their struggle against the enemies of democracy.” Reporting to President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1954, the Commission reaffirmed its faith in publications as an antidote to communism and even tipped its hat to Joseph McCarthy,

2 Harry Truman to Jesse Larson, June 16, 1951, quoted in A National Program for the Publication of the Papers of American Leaders: A Preliminary Report to the President of the United States by the National Historical Publications Commission (Washington, 1951), vii.
3 Ibid., iii.

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the junior senator from Wisconsin: “In times like these, when the democratic
world is seriously threatened by enemies within and without its borders,
they believe that an understanding of the American heritage and of the
ideas and ideals upon which it rests is vitally important.” The Russian bear
was to be checked by the American eagle’s pen no less than by its sword.

In its report to the president in 1951 the National Historical Publications
Commission identified five individuals whose surpassing importance in the
nation’s history required that the publication of their papers take precedence
over those of lesser men: Jefferson, Franklin, Hamilton, Adams, and Mad-
son. (Washington’s papers had been published in a thirty-nine-volume
dition a decade or so earlier.) Thus was born the concept of the five
“priority projects” in the documentary editing community. It seemed self-
evident to the Commission that Franklin’s papers should be published in
Philadelphia, “perhaps as a cooperative enterprise to which the American
Philosophical Society, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the University
of Pennsylvania, the City of Philadelphia, the State of Pennsylvania, the
Federal Government, one or more of the great foundations, and other
organizations would contribute.” The Commission did not, however, reckon
with the rivalry between Yale and Princeton as a force which might lure
the publication of Franklin’s papers to New Haven. Yale had some con-
nection with Franklin: it awarded him a master of arts degree in 1753, and
it held an important collection of his papers, donated by alumnus William
Smith Mason. That Princeton had the Jefferson Papers and was basking in
the prestige which their publication conferred and that Yale had nothing
comparable was intolerable to Chester Kerr, director of the Yale University
Press. Kerr mobilized the money and enthusiasm of fellow Yale alumni
Henry Luce and R.R. Donnelly, obtained commitments of space and staff
support from the university, and joined with others in persuading the
American Philosophical Society, holder of the largest body of Franklin’s
papers, to co-sponsor a New Haven publication. As publisher of its own
“priority” project, the Yale bulldog now marched with the Princeton tiger
into the fray against the Russian bear.

Yale’s most important contributor to the Franklin Papers project was
Leonard W. Labaree, holder of the university’s Farnam chair of history,
who became first editor of the Papers in 1954. Labaree was a distinguished
colonial historian (his Royal Government in America has been reprinted in
the American Classics series) and an experienced editor as well. As official

4 A National Program for the Publication of Historical Documents: A Report to the President
5 A National Program for the Publication of the Papers of American Leaders, 11.
historian of Connecticut, he put through the press the state’s voluminous public records and edited the Yale Historical Series for the Yale Press. He needed no tutoring in editing historical documents and, although he visited Julian Boyd at Princeton to inspect his operations, he did not imitate Boyd’s editorial philosophy or apparatus. The format Labaree employed in The Papers of Benjamin Franklin differed from Boyd’s in several respects, the most conspicuous of which, perhaps, was his placement of numerically keyed footnotes at the bottom of each page rather than at the end of each document keyed to words or phrases therein—the style used by Boyd for letters (though not headnotes). Labaree’s editorial philosophy required impartiality and detachment. He conceded that an editor would develop an affinity for his subject, but insisted that the editor must try to repress his sympathies when presenting the documents. The business of the editor, in Labaree’s opinion, was to explain the context in which documents appeared and let them speak for themselves. Editors were not gratuitously to write narrative history nor to assume the posture of partisans, wading into historical controversies on the side of their subjects. He drew the line between editing and editorializing and insisted that it be scrupulously observed.

Labaree had the good fortune, when he assumed his position in 1954, to be joined by gifted assistants: Whitfield Bell, a respected historian of science, and Helen Boatfield, an indefatigable researcher. A worldwide search for documents was initiated; the papers were assembled and transcribed by a team led by Helene Fineman; and the editing began. Labaree’s first Franklin volume appeared in 1959 to the acclaim of critics and reviewers. Ten years later with the appearance of volume 14, bringing Franklin’s life to December 31, 1767, Labaree retired. He was succeeded by a scholar whose distinction matched his own, William B. Willcox, sometime chairman of the history department at the University of Michigan and author of several books, including a prize-winning monograph on Sir Henry Clinton. Willcox died in September 1985, but not before bringing the series to its half-way point at volume 25.

Aside from supplying a prospectus at the beginning of each volume, briefly describing its contents, Willcox changed little that Labaree had established. Careful readers of the footnotes will detect a less austere, more chatty, tone with occasional sallies of wit, but continuity is the most conspicuous feature of Willcox’s tenure. Beginning in volume 23, which brought Franklin to France, there are certain changes, such as the abstracting and calendaring of letters written to Franklin, but these were produced, not by disenchantment with the series’ editorial style, but by the necessity of dealing with an avalanche of documents surviving from the French period of Franklin’s life. A more significant change, beginning in volume 25, may not be apparent to readers of the series but will remove an irony revealed
in the August 1986 number of *Annotations*, the newsletter of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC). In that issue a survey of "automated systems" used by NHPRC-sponsored projects was published, which disclosed that among a score of such projects only the Franklin Papers was not using computers to assist publication. The editors of the papers of America's greatest technologist were the only ones not using modern technology! This situation has begun to change with volume 25, some of which was produced by computer, although the full benefits of on-line computerized editing and production methods will not be realized, apparently, until the appearance of volumes 27 and 28.

Reviewers (with the exception of some scholars of early American literature) have consistently praised *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* for adherence to the highest standards of the editorial craft. The footnotes have been accurate and judicious; the coverage comprehensive; the transcriptions flawless; and the observations of editorial conventions scrupulous. But, asking a question which would have immediately occurred to Franklin, what use has the edition been? What good has it done? This question is not easy to answer and for that reason is not often asked by editors of documentary projects, who sometimes seem to be on automatic pilot, generating streams of documents without venturing to assess their impact on the audience for which they are intended.

The Franklin edition is not achieving the objective of those who in the early 1950s conceived it and its companion projects: the invigoration of the commitment to democracy among the "general public." According to figures recently compiled by the NHPRC, 7,972 copies of the first volume of *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* were sold, a figure that is somewhat misleading as a basis of comparison to subsequent volumes because volume one was heavily promoted and enjoyed considerable sales as a "coffee table" book. Sales of the most recent Franklin volume were 1,097, a decline of 86 percent from volume one. Comparable figures exist for the other priority projects and, indeed, for all of the editions sponsored by the NHPRC. The sales of the Jefferson Papers, for example, have declined 68 percent from the first to the most recent volume (4,103 to 1,299), the Hamilton Papers 59 percent (2,978 to 1,221). A factor that is both an effect and cause of the plummeting sales is the escalating prices of the documentary editions. As sales have declined, publishers have been forced to raise prices to recover the costs; the increased prices reduce sales; prices are raised again; and the cycle repeats itself. The price of volume 25 of *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* is $55, well beyond the means of the average citizen. Other figures produced by the NHPRC indicate that only 7 percent of the sales—76 books—of the most recent Franklin volume were to individuals. The "general public" is not being reached by the Franklin or other editions.
But surely The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, prepared by scholars in conformity with the most rigorous scholarly standards, have been of use to other scholars and hence to scholarship itself. Even here the answer is not clear. Some observers are skeptical that scholars make much use of the modern documentary editions and are prepared to agree with a recent reviewer that "hardly anyone except the reviewer and editors will ever read the entire volume." Gordon Wood, reviewing Esmond Wright's new biography, Franklin of Philadelphia (Cambridge, 1986), in the introduction to which Wright acknowledges his debt to The Papers of Benjamin Franklin and to the staff of the project, remarked that to "recover the historical Franklin of the eighteenth century is well-nigh impossible." If Wright, with unlimited access to the Franklin Papers, was unsuccessful in depicting the "historical Franklin," what purpose is the publication of his papers serving? Editorial projects, which are at the mercy of their readers, cannot, of course, be blamed for the opacity of their users, but Wright is an accomplished historian whose apparent failure to profit from his exposure to the Franklin Papers requires further investigation. To obtain a more accurate appraisal of whether The Papers of Benjamin Franklin are broadening our knowledge of Franklin and his times, I compared Wright's treatment of three episodes in Franklin's life, on which the editors mustered unusual diligence and ingenuity, to Carl Van Doren's treatment of the same events in his 1938 biography of Franklin. The episodes chosen were the Albany Congress (1754), the conflict with the Penns over the taxation of their estates (1757-1760), and the Hutchinson letters affair (1772-1773). In none of those cases did Wright, with the full benefit of The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, improve or enrich the interpretation offered by Van Doren. The question recurs: what purpose is the Franklin Papers project serving?

It is significant to note that in his description of the taxation controversy with the Penns, Professor Wright missed a subtle point—a potential misunderstanding between the Penns and the Pennsylvania Assembly over the taxation of the former's "located, unoccupied lands"—of whose significance the editors attempted to alert the readers in footnotes. This raises the question of whether the editors should not, after all, be more forthcoming in their annotations, even at the risk of over-writing and of lacing their footnotes with their own opinions. Since the policies of the editors-in-chief of the Franklin Papers, as explained earlier, discouraged such initiatives, the edi-

7 The Times Literary Supplement, August 29, 1986, 945.
torial staff has been obliged to seek other outlets—journals, books, etc.—to disseminate the special knowledge which their close study of Franklin’s life has imparted to them. Similar paths have been followed on other editorial projects, but the editorial staff of the Franklin Papers has over the years been more prolific than its counterparts elsewhere. Franklin Papers editors have produced monographs and articles on the doctor’s domestic life, his social life, his diplomacy, his ministrations to Americans imprisoned by Britain during the Revolutionary War, his efforts to establish royal government in Pennsylvania, his demographic skills, his scientific accomplishments, and on other topics, large and small. It is through these outlets that new information about Franklin has been transmitted, but there is no guarantee that scholars will absorb it. Wood, for example, chides Wright for ignoring Claude-Anne Lopez’s revelations about Franklin’s domestic life in her Mon Cher Papa, and some of the journals in which the scholarship appears are obscure.

A further problem in relying on staff to spread knowledge about Franklin is that prospects for such activities in the future appear to be declining as inexorably as the print runs of the documentary editions. A widespread impatience with the slow pace of the editorial projects—Franklin included—has transformed many editors into computer programmers whose primary purpose is to expedite production by manipulating technology; at the same time, uncertainty about the future funding of the projects has converted many editors into money raisers. In a world of technicians and fundraisers the editor as scholar appears to be an endangered species.

What use have the first twenty-five volumes of the Franklin Papers been? Neither they nor their companion editions have reached a general audience. That they have had an appreciable impact on scholarship, except through such “back-channels” as independent publication by staff members, cannot be easily demonstrated. A pessimistic assessment this—and one which Franklin himself would have scorned. My papers, he might have said, will have a long life. They have been so assiduously collected and expertly edited that they will last for generations. They are now in their infancy. Who knows to what use they may be put over time. Remember my question: What good is a new-born baby? Suppress your doubts and proceed.

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