

Clio and the Historical Editor in Canada

J. M. Bumsted

Volume 9, Number 2, Spring 1980

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad9_2rv01

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Bumsted, J. M. (1980). Clio and the Historical Editor in Canada. *Acadiensis*, 9(2), 92–101.

Reviews/Revue

Clio and the Historical Editor

The historical editor has always been the poor stepchild of Clio. What he does is always useful and often essential, but he labours his long hours out of sight in the scullery and is seldom admitted to the parlour to be appreciated for his accomplishments. To edit — even brilliantly — a lengthy manuscript or a collection of papers is regarded by most followers of the Muse as uncreative hackwork, requiring far less originality and imagination than writing a journal article, much less a “real book”. Anyone who has tried to get an editorial project approved as partial fulfillment of the requirements for a higher degree, or sought legitimate recognition for editorial work from a university promotion or salary committee, or requested external funding for (much less attempted to interest a publisher in) such activities, will recognize the problem very well.

If the editing of historical texts and manuscripts is generally regarded as a second-class activity, the situation in Canada is perhaps a bit worse than in some other places in western Christendom. For Canada, unfortunately, has no tradition of editing whatever, and while a considerable number of important projects have somehow been completed, we still lag far behind countries like the United States, Great Britain, France (or even New Zealand, Australia, or Scotland, just so the comparisons are not regarded as totally unrealistic). Neither public nor private agencies in Canada have ever regarded the production of critical historical texts and documents as an essential part of the nation's cultural heritage. Virtually every American state has published its legislative records for at least the formative years, for example, and the production in print of substantial series of public records in Britain has long been an essential part of the function of the Public Record Office. Similarly, the publication (with elaborate scholarly apparatus) of the collected papers of leading historical figures, usually but not always political leaders, proceeds apace in other places. For the period of nation-building, the Americans are now reduced to third and fourth-rank characters, having long since begun extensively-researched and well-financed editions for the Washingtons, Jeffersons, and Franklins. As one American historian recently observed, “The publication of the annotated letters and papers of eminent figures in American history will probably be the most enduring contribution of the current generation of scholars to the historical record”.¹ The same comment could scarcely be made of the present generation of scholars in Canada.

Historical anniversaries — of which this country has a good many — go past with scarcely a whimper from historians. Ironically enough, the first native-born Canadian with any substantial body of papers to receive the full editorial treatment — in a project just now underway — was hung for treason nearly a century

Barbara Chernow, review of *Lafayette in the Age of the American Revolution: Selected Letters and Papers, 1776-1790*, in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., XXXVI (1979), p. 484.

ago, and the published edition will appear to coincide with the centenary of his execution. Equally ironically, the major editorial undertaking in Canada presently nearing completion of an individual's collected papers has for its subject a nineteenth-century British statesman who probably never thought for an uninterrupted thirty seconds about Canada. One ought not be parochial and insist that Canadians working with Canadian money should be concentrating solely upon Canadian historical figures, but it is a truism that if we do not, no one else will. And if anyone else did — the Americans, for example — we would probably not be very happy about it.

The very real contributions of private subscription series such as those of the Champlain Society, the Husdon's Bay Record Society, and the Manitoba Record Society, as well as the efforts of certain publishers such as the Carleton Library, should not be minimized, although financial constraints have been real enough for such publishers. From them editors get very little financial assistance or reward, and subscribers or purchasers have not been enthusiastic about multivolume projects ("Oh no, not another volume of Simeon Perkins this year!"). Both expense and audience have inevitably restricted production to one or at best two-volume projects. Fur-traders and explorers, whose records seldom exceed the desirable length, have thus been over-represented in the output, and diaries and journals are the preferred manuscript material to edit and publish, since they usually come in manageable proportions. The situation can get out of hand in the other direction, of course, as the production of critical texts and collected papers has perhaps done in the field of literature, although one hastens to add, not in Canadian literature. Many readers will recall the well-merited blast a few years ago issued by the late Edmund Wilson against the Modern Language Association's critical text industry. But I do not believe that Canadian history (or Canadian literature) runs much risk on this score for the foreseeable future.

What historical editing in Canada suffers from is not over-production, but an absence of a clear sense of priorities (how often does the problem of the publication of texts and documents get openly discussed at academic conferences?) combined with a lack of critical criteria for the frequent but scattered works which do regularly appear. A reviewer can scarcely pretend to resolve these deficiencies in the space of a brief essay, although it is probably useful to call attention to them. The matter of priorities, particularly, needs to be tackled by many experts over many years of discussion, and in the meantime one has to accept the present *chacun à son gout* in the selection of items to edit and print. As for critical criteria, they must be approached with considerable trepidation, not least because most of the historical editing done in this country simply does not enjoy the sorts of rich subsidies — public and private — comparable projects would attract elsewhere. A few years ago, for example, one of the major editors in the United States — Lyman Butterfield of the John Adams Papers — took L.F.S. Upton to task in a review article for the editorial incompleteness of his

two-volume edition of the Diaries of William Smith.² Butterfield had headed a huge consortium of scholars and researchers in the preparation of the Adams diaries, and totally failed to appreciate the disadvantages placed upon a Canadian scholar working single-handed and without major funding.

The minimum to be expected from an editor, I would submit, is (1) an accurate text, and some explicit statement of the transcription style employed,³ (2) a complete text or some editorial explanation and justification of any omissions, (3) an editorial introduction which provides an adequate context for the printed transcription, especially for the non-specialist reader, (4) sufficient annotation to clarify obscure references in the text, including those to characters and situations given more than fleeting mention by the original author, and (5) a full index, at least nominal and preferably including place names and subject headings as well. In addition, particularly when the printed text represents only a small fraction of a major unpublished collection of papers — which is often the case in Canadian editions — the editor should make some effort to use the occasion to suggest to other scholars the richness of the total collection, probably by employing the additional manuscripts in the annotations. This last point is arguable, although obviously desirable. But the first five points are essential both from the standpoint of scholarship abstractly considered and from that of the book-purchasing public, which pays at least part of the bill for publication.

Publishers — and those who these days often provide them with the subsidies which make publication in book form possible — have some obligation to their audience to insist that an editor does the job adequately, as well as a responsibility to the world of scholarship. After all, there are now a number of less costly media than the book which can be employed if the essential aim of the editor is solely or mainly to make an unpublished text or document available without scholarly apparatus. To place that text between the covers of an increasingly expensive book entails additional responsibilities for everyone involved, from editor to publisher to subsidizing agency if there is one. Were such criteria as I have listed above generally accepted as necessary components of a proper job of editing, we would clearly be beyond the point where work up to the standard could be regarded as merely mechanical. But at the present time, the circle is unbroken. An absence of recognition and appreciation for quality work, combined with a lack of universal insistence upon it, has provided little incentive to produce any. Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of what they have produced, editors of Canadian manuscripts have had few guidelines within which to operate.

2 L.H. Butterfield, "New Light on the North Atlantic Triangle in the 1780s", *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., XXI (1964), pp. 596-606.

3 The best brief discussion of transcription strategies remains that by Samuel Eliot Morison in Frank Freidel, ed., *Harvard Guide to American History* (rev. ed., Cambridge, Mass., 1974), I, pp. 27-36. But see also Clarence E. Carter, *Historical Editing* (Washington, 1952).

It is, of course, a great delight to see primary material such as *The Diary and Related Writings of the Reverend Joseph Dimock* (Lancelot Press for Acadia Divinity College and Baptist Historical Committee of the United Baptist Convention of the Atlantic Provinces, 1979), edited by George Levy, and *The Dalhousie Journals* ([Ottawa], Oberon Press, 1979), edited by Marjory Whitelaw, appearing in print. While all regions of Canada suffer from a scarcity of such material, the Atlantic region has probably fared the worst over the years, despite the richness of its historical record. As one who has offered courses in the history of Atlantic Canada to students upon the other coast of the country, I can testify to the frustrating problems of attempting to find original sources in print, especially for the period after 1800. I can also testify somewhat ruefully to the distinct lack of enthusiasm displayed by most publishers to proposals for editions of material relating to the Lower Provinces, usually on the grounds of absence of market. Thus the publishers of these two works are to be commended for their enterprise (or audacity) in making these editions available to the public.

One of the richest archival resources in the region is the Baptist Historical Collection at Acadia University, and Dimock's diary represents the inaugural volume of a projected series on the "Baptist Heritage in Atlantic Canada". But not all the documentary riches are within the Atlantic area itself, and Lord Dalhousie's journals — the originals of which are in the Dalhousie Papers at the Scottish Record Office in Edinburgh — provide a sample of the sorts of material which can be found without, not least in Scotland. One thinks immediately, for example, of the voluminous (and regrettably little-known) journals of Sir Thomas Cochrane, covering his years governing Newfoundland, in the National Library of Scotland. It would be tempting to devote this essay to enumerating other major sources for Atlantic history which desperately need to be made available to the general public, such as Benjamin Chappel's Prince Edward Island diary, covering more than fifty years and recording most of the principal events of the Island's early history. This unique record — in the Charlottetown Public Library — is rapidly deteriorating from constant use by researchers, and some form of authoritative publication is essential for sheer preservation of the manuscript. But the temptation must be resisted, and we must turn to an evaluation of the two editions which have recently appeared in print.

Although neither editor says anything about the guidelines employed in preparing their transcriptions, both have preferred a fairly literal — and have produced a reasonably accurate — rendering of their respective originals. Levy has reproduced everything from his Dimock manuscripts, including the undecipherable notations the minister placed underneath each of the marriages he recorded, as well as his inventive spelling. Whitelaw, on the other hand, has made cuts in the Dalhousie text. She has not been furtive about her excisions, for the standard three dots appear to mark each omission. But nowhere are the cuts spe-

cifically mentioned, and no explanation of what has been left out appears. Comparison of the Whitelaw text with the originals in the Scottish Record Office indicates that most of the deletions are brief entries describing the weather. But why exclude some and include most others? Moreover, a few of the omissions are matters of substance, including several paragraphs describing meetings of the Rockingham Club and one on agricultural improvements (an important theme in the journals).

Perhaps the two most critical and inexplicable deletions come in entries for 24 May and 7 July 1818. On the former date, Dalhousie records his reactions to learning that the appointment promised him in Canada as successor to Sir John Sherbrooke had gone to the Duke of Richmond. Copying into the journal the text of a letter of protest written to Lord Bathurst (omitted and only briefly described by Whitelaw), he then adds, in an important passage also deleted:

I have sent copies of the above to two of my private friends, the Duke of Buccleugh in Scotland and Colonel Drinkwater in London — to satisfy them with whom I have long lived in habits of intimate friendship thro' life. Who take a warm interest in all my concerns, & whose good opinion I shall always most highly value. I wish to satisfy them that if I do not start at the insult, it is from a personal respect to the Prince Regent, from that Loyal & dutiful feeling towards my Sovereign that teaches me to honour his commands, & from no mean desire of holding public place of emolument, no humble service to the Ministers of the Crown.⁴

On 7 July, Dalhousie was visiting in dissenting Yankee country in the Annapolis Valley, and he included the following anecdote in his original text:

Colonel Crane the member for Horton, & one of the principal canting Hypocrites here, talked to Sir George Prevost when visiting this part, of the Grand Prairee, the Grand Dyke, the Grand Mountain & many other Grand Points, but said Sir George "you have forgot to tell me of the Grand Disputes about the lands of this Township".⁵

Since both self-revelation and humour are in short supply in Dalhousie's text, the omission of these passages seems particularly difficult to understand. At the same time, readers of the *Dalhousie Journals* need not fear the worst from those ubiquitous ellipses in the text. Most of the cuts are minor, and even including those of substantive material represent no more than a tiny fraction of the whole. Given this fact, however, one can only wonder why we could not have had the entire journal.

4 Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh, GD 45/3/541, p. 154. Quotation printed by permission of the Earl of Dalhousie.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 163. Quotation printed by permission of the Earl of Dalhousie.

The transcription of an accurate text is only the beginning of the job for the historical editor. Although transcription involves far more than merely secretarial competence, the real work involves placing the text in proper context, through an editorial introduction and annotation. Both Levy and Whitelaw have made serious efforts in this direction, for which they deserve full marks, although in neither case is the result wholly satisfying. For the Dimock diary, the basic problem is that editor Levy has approached his text as if it were no more than a piece of documentation for the early history of the Atlantic Baptists. Yet the heart of Dimock's diary is in the first 68 pages of printed text, devoted to a detailed record of a missionary journey taken to New England from November 1796 to November 1798. Since this period was the only one in his life for which Dimock appeared to take pains to preserve a running record, it clearly was important to him. Why he should have left his flock at Chester to venture to the United States is never made clear in the diary, although something inexorably drew him on to the remote community of Fort Edward, then in territory disputed between New York and Vermont and now in northeastern New York state. Levy speculates that Dimock's prospective bride (whom he married in Connecticut in August 1798) may have resided in Fort Edward, and certainly the passionate ardour and intensity with which Dimock writes of the village suggests some personal romantic attraction. That Dimock should cast this passion in religious terms also suggests the extent to which sacred and secular emotions could be intertwined by the evangelical pietist.

Whatever his motivations, Dimock's preaching experiences in New England during his sojourn there form part of a critical document in the history of North American revivalism, and Levy could certainly have made far more of the tour in his introduction and footnotes. Particularly useful would have been references to the works of Dimock's American contemporaries — such as Isaac Backus's three-volume history of the Baptists, which deals with many of the personalities and communities Dimock visited, and outlines the underlying tensions of the period as well — and recent scholarship, especially William G. McLoughlin's monumental *New England Dissent, 1630-1833*, which enlarges upon Backus in the light of modern research.⁶ Such references would have placed Dimock in the context of the religious history of New England, and illuminated his record for Canadian readers as well.

Two features of the American tour undertaken by Dimock are worth emphasizing. First, there is the sheer excitement and enthusiasm (in both the eighteenth-century and modern sense of the term) with which Dimock was met by the common folk, with explicit parallels drawn by several of them to George

⁶ Isaac Backus, *A History of New England, with Particular Reference to the denomination of Christians called Baptists* (3 vols., Boston, 1777-1796; the 2 volume 1871 edition edited by David Weston contains a useful index); William G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent 1630-1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State* (2 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1971).

Whitefield and the Great Awakening of the 1740s. This reaction was more than simply the response of isolated rural and frontier communities to the presence of a spirited itinerant preacher, for Dimock did equally well in the frontier areas of Northern New England and the settled urban and semi-urban ones of Rhode Island and southeastern Massachusetts. Self-taught, totally without sophistication, and certainly more than a bit primitive in both his preaching style and doctrine, Dimock represented a type of preacher who was dying out in New England in the 1790s in denominations and churches which had been founded by men of his stamp a half century earlier. He brought the freshness and spontaneity of the Nova Scotia revival begun by Henry Alline back to New England, and the common people instinctively responded to the nature of his evangelical appeal. Secondly, there is the controversy — again reminiscent of the 1740s — which Dimock stirred in several places, but recorded in most detail for Rehoboth.

Levy tells his readers nothing about Rehoboth, a flourishing Massachusetts community of small farmers and artisan-manufacturers located ten miles east of Providence and distinguished for the historic strength of its popular dissent from New England Congregationalism.⁷ When Dimock visited there, the town had just experienced a major church-state confrontation, in which the numerically-superior Baptists of the First Parish had fought strenuously and with partial success against the Congregational established church. They had managed to avoid ecclesiastical taxation, but by court decree had lost their meetinghouse to the adherents of the standing order. Because Levy does not communicate the intensity of the church-state controversy and the nature of ecclesiastical politics during the period of Dimock's travels in New England, his comments in the introduction and footnotes fail to capture the true flavour of the text. Levy's casual footnote reference to Dimock's continual use of the term "society" (p. 178) is unfortunately typical; in New England ecclesiological terminology, a society was the body of those attending a particular meetinghouse and supporting its minister, always to be distinguished from the "church", which consisted of the smaller body of true believers eligible to partake of communion.

Dimock's problems in Rehoboth were both classic and ironic. Although initially invited to preach by the ordained minister, Dimock's presence was opposed by a major part of the society, which controlled the meetinghouse. Forced to meet in private houses, Dimock managed to produce a major local revival, and had the support of all the members of the church. Such a situation had been a common one during the Great Awakening, when regenerate church members (and those newly-awakened) were opposed by the non-members who controlled the purse-strings.⁸ In this instance, a large part of the opposition to Dimock

7 See Leonard Bliss, Jr., *History of Rehoboth* (Boston, 1836).

8 Consult my "The Pilgrims' Progress: The Ecclesiastical History of southeastern Massachusetts, 1620-1776" (PhD dissertation, Brown University, 1965).

occurred because he represented an older tradition — still alive in Nova Scotia — of mixed communion of Baptists and pedobaptists, as well as an out-of-date populist evangelical style. But Rehoboth's little drama in which Dimock was intimately involved was played out entirely among dissenting Baptists, rather than within the context of the New England Standing Order. Dimock's Nova Scotia background placed him closer to the heart of the earlier New England Awakening than his staid critics were prepared to accept, and the confrontation between William Doggett and Dimock detailed by the latter has the added irony that Dimock was accused of political disloyalty because he was from Loyalist Nova Scotia, when the real problem was that he was in a far more fundamental sense faithful to the founding spirit of the Rehoboth Baptist Church than was his opponent.

Dimock's tour of New England occurred at a critical time for the Baptist denomination there. It came right at the point of Baptist success in its fifty-year struggle against the Congregational establishment and in attaining respectability; the twin accomplishments went hand-in-hand, of course. For both Congregationalists and Baptists, the years following were ones of gradual decline and loss of popular support. While this decline has been subjected to much investigation and analysis by American religious historians, the response of the common folk to Dimock suggests that a large part of the problem was that the lessons of the first great Awakening had been lost upon a ministry which had become entirely too sophisticated and genteel to serve the spiritual and psychological needs of the population. New England's Baptists lost ground to a variety of "come-outer" sects spawned principally in the backcountry. During the same period, the Baptists of the Atlantic Region flourished and reached the high point of their development, and — as has generally been the case in Canadian religious history — few competing sects made their appearance in the area. One can hardly escape the suspicion that the presence of men like Joseph Dimock kept the faith alive, and that — however much the thought might distress — the absence of institutions of higher learning and theological seminaries played a major role in keeping the Baptist ministry close to the people they were serving.

If Dimock's diary is a fascinating and significant historical document, the same cannot be claimed for the Earl of Dalhousie's journals. While the Baptist minister was an active and involved participant in events of import and urgency, the Scots peer was a detached and passive observer. Levy discusses at some length the conventions and priorities which led Dimock to ignore the great events of secular history in his record, but Whitelaw offers us little clue to the strange absence of the important in Dalhousie's account. A different but equally powerful convention, as well as personal inclination, clearly kept the Earl's journal at a distant and clinical level, screening the reader from anything of consequence either inside Dalhousie's head or in the outside world. It has long been fashionable to disparage the evangelical pietist as an individual obsessed by

an unattractive world view, and to prefer the ordered rationality of the Enlightenment which impinged so strongly upon Dalhousie. In terms of questioning this fashion, one could do worse than to read and compare the account of the death of a friend given by Dimock (pp. 55-62) with the reaction recorded by Dalhousie to the death in Britain of a son (p. 44). The former is to some extent stylized and perhaps even morbid, but it carries its emotion and grief proudly and openly, while the latter is stiff-lipped, controlled, terse, and sentimentalized. The two contrasting accounts, indeed, are typical of their respective authors. Dimock's concerns may have been spiritual rather than secular, but his feelings are intense and a sense of commitment is conveyed even to the reader who does not appreciate the context in which they are expressed. Dalhousie's account remains cool and distant throughout. We may explain these differences in terms of Evangelical versus Rationalist, lower-class versus upper-class, or even Yankee/Nova Scotian versus Scots/British newcomer. But the differences are readily apparent, and modern audiences may react somewhat differently to the authors than would have been the case a generation or two ago.

In his journal Dalhousie tells us virtually nothing about his administration of Nova Scotia; there are no revelations of any political infighting or of the governor's role in the events of his time. The Earl's attention seems really engaged only when he is describing his extensive travels within and without Nova Scotia. An interested and reasonably perceptive tourist, he had a particular eye for farming practice and for the many former Scots in the territory he visited. Like most British landholders, Dalhousie instinctively sought to develop the country through wealthy proprietors granting long leases to tenants, but he was categorically informed the system he sought (almost exactly the one in effect in Prince Edward Island) simply would not work. The Earl could only note:

A man emigrates to this Country on the information that he will get land for nothing — & he will not take a farm when he can get some hundred acres for £13, the fees of Office paid for it. Every man consequently is laird here, & the classes of the community known in England as Tenantry & peasantry do not exist in these Provinces & probably will not be formed untill a full stop is put to the system of granting lands (p. 62).

The text of the journal does not indicate that he made a serious attempt to reform the system, a lack of action which may have been his major contribution to Nova Scotia.

Given the limited nature of Dalhousie's journal record — more akin to the familiar "Tours of" often published by contemporary travellers than an intimate record of a key administrative official — one can only regret that the editor did not choose to employ the text as a peg upon which to hang — through extensive annotation from the rich Dalhousie collection — some more detailed reconstruction of his activities in Nova Scotia. While this suggestion is more in

the nature of a regret than a criticism, it is certainly fair to observe that the footnotes prepared by Whitelaw take little advantage of the Earl's papers. The note for "Agricola", for example, offers a brief biographical sketch of John Young but neither mentions nor employs the correspondence between Young and Dalhousie preserved in the Dalhousie Muniments. Nor has the editor attempted to collate the journals with Dalhousie's daily appointment books, also preserved in the Scottish Record Office. In short, the reader of *The Dalhousie Journals* gets little notion of the richness of the manuscript collection whence they came, and no real grasp of Dalhousie's activities or importance to the province.

While Levy includes both a nominal index (which goes no further than Dimock himself in identifying people — who was "Elder Jones", for example?) and an index of places mentioned by his subject, there is no index at all for *The Dalhousie Journals*. Only because I read the entire text did I learn that Dalhousie made an important entry regarding the subject of my own research — the Earl of Selkirk — and other students of peripheral topics may well never realize that Dalhousie had something of interest to say about them as well.

We must clearly be grateful for what we get in the way of printed historical texts. At the same time, we ought to expect more of their editors than these publications provide. Historical editing in Canada must get itself, like Cinderella, out of Clio's scullery, and into the mainstream of recording and explaining the nation's rich heritage.

J.M. BUMSTED

On The Study Of Canadian Businessmen

At the beginning of the twentieth century leading Canadian businessmen were seen as iron men of grim determination, enormous courage, and magnificent dedication to Canadian nationhood. Above all they were builders and creators. Men like Galt, Smith, and Van Horne wrestled against great physical odds and frequently against antagonistic powers and principalities to create the sinews of the modern Canadian economy. Gradually, however, these heroes came to be viewed as smaller than the institutional framework in which they functioned; the profit motive and original sin were introduced as dominant elements in their ideas and decisions. In the more recent literature businessmen are perceived more cynically, as simply one of a number of groups endeavouring to shape the values, structures and needs of society in their own interests. In this manifestation heroes and altruism have largely disappeared and the precious little creativity to be found among Canadian entrepreneurs is usually expended in the development of oligopolies designed to exploit Canadian resources and Canadian society for the benefit of these corporate entities. Indeed, the turn-of-the-century Canadian businessmen portrayed by recent scholarship are