

On editing and indexing a series of letters

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The anatomy of a scholarly edition: a step-by-step account of how 1437 semi-legible letters from China emerged in fully annotated print.

Some of those who have struggled through the uncharted reaches of editorial procedures involved in publishing a bulky series of letters may well have found themselves wishing for navigational charts or, at the least, for fog-horns. One who has passed this way should have left a logbook, a day-by-day account of perils encountered, harbours for safe anchorage, and the like. Each crew of each ship should not have to chart the waters entirely anew.

Such were my reactions after helping to annotate and edit the 1437 letters of Sir Robert Hart, an Englishman resident in China from 1854 to 1908, during some forty of those years as inspector general of the Imperial Chinese Maritime Customs Service and one of the most influential Westerners in the Far East. *The I.G. in Peking* was edited by John King Fairbank, Katherine Frost Bruner, and Elizabeth MacLeod Matheson, and published by Harvard University Press in two volumes totalling 1625 pages. The project was a lengthy one; first approached in 1968, it reached publication in January 1976. Partly this was because two of the editors worked part-time; but the procedures arrived at would have been the same even if applied at a faster tempo, and may be useful to others who are about to venture on these seas.

The letters consisted of a series written by Hart to his agent and friend in the London Office of the Chinese Customs Service, James Duncan Campbell. The two men had met briefly in 1862–3, when Campbell had been in China with the previous inspector general, H. N. Lay. On home leave in 1866, Hart recruited him again, and they returned to China together. Soon, however, Campbell was sent back to Europe on a special mission, and except for one other short period in Peking he remained in London, Hart's assistant, innovative collaborator, and trusted and devoted friend. Hart in Peking wrote to him each Sunday; Campbell in London wrote on Fridays. With mail taking six weeks or more, they had each five or six letters in transit at any given moment, and to avoid chaos they used a numbering system for their correspondence. All this went on from 1868 to Campbell's death in 1907.

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The originals of Hart's side of the correspondence, in his own increasingly illegible handwriting, were in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London. Fortunately, in the 1920s a typescript had been made—twelve fascicles of legal-size paper, put together under the direction of a man who had been acquainted with Hart and who could generally decipher his script. Thus the copies were on the whole unusually correct, but not without occasional lapses into nonsense or even outright hiatuses. Their authenticity was vouched for by the man who brought them to the attention of the East Asian Research Center at Harvard, a later (and last foreign) inspector general, L. K. Little. It was he in fact who had brought them out of China when he was forced to leave after the second world war.

First discussions with the publisher, the Harvard University Press, covered such matters as the authenticity of the transcripts, the availability of the originals for comparison, the source of official permission to publish (the current inspector general in Taipei). Next came matters of general policy concerning the level of publication to be sought. Obviously the letters would appear in more than one volume; they would need annotation, background as to the period, identification of people and places mentioned, a comprehensive index, a glossary. In short, the aim was a definitive edition on a scholarly level.

Duplicating copies

A step preliminary to beginning actual work with the letters was to prepare duplicate copies of them for use by the various persons concerned. Twenty copies (of twelve fascicles each) were photocopied, with pagination running successively from page 1 of fascicle 1 to page 2961 of fascicle 12; they were collated and bound in cardboard covers. Hindsight reveals two errors.

First, the number was excessive. We had supposed that the notes would be written by various scholars, each on his own specialty, and each therefore requiring his own complete copy of the letters. Actually we needed one each for seven people: our editor at the press, the three editors at the East Asian Research Center, Mr Little, writer of the introduction, and two retired Customs commissioners in England who helped us on matters of identification, on details of Customs procedures, and by checks against the original letters in London. Ten copies would have been enough.

The second error was a bit more troublesome; the editors should have taken a better look at the letters and

decided whether they were to be in strictly chronological order or be left as they had originally been assembled. I have said that Hart and Campbell numbered their letters. The trouble was, they too fumbled about before they arrived at a system satisfactory to them. It was only when the editors began working with the letters that it was realized how essential it was to rearrange them in a single chronological sequence. By then it took a certain amount of breaking into fascicles to accomplish something that could have been easily dealt with by an earlier decision.

Preparing a working index

Another preliminary task, but a crucial one, was to render the letters navigable, so to speak, by the preparation of a working index; until that was done, no one could find his way through the many pages of typescript to work with the material intelligently. It was essential to be able to follow a topic through its various episodes, to trace the history of personal relationships, and to watch the unfolding of policy. Cogent advice from Lyman Butterfield (long the editor of the *Adams Papers*) led to the use of specially prepared slips instead of index cards. These were double thicknesses of paper, cut to 4" x 6" size; the top slip being 'no carbon required' paper, writing inscribed on the top slips appeared on the second slips as well, but without the nuisance of handling carbons. The two slips were then separated and filed, one in the order of pages, the other alphabetically. Fifty thousand of these slips (top sheet white, bottom sheet canary, joined along the 4" side) were ordered, which in the end proved a fifth too many.

The first set of these slips, that in the order of pagination, remained untouched in its twelve file boxes until the final days when page proofs arrived. The second set, in alphabetical order, was typed up into 225 pages of a temporary index, and photocopied. Replete with errors at this stage, it was available for comment and correction by everyone concerned in the project. My own copy became a gold mine of notes, comments, queries, hunches to be checked in the library or elsewhere. The making of this working index occupied me, at the rate of twenty-two hours a week, for some eight months—a sizable chunk of time, but one that none of us ever felt had been misspent.

Editorial decisions

Meanwhile a second editor, Elizabeth MacLeod Matheson, had embarked on her first critical reading of the typescript with an eye to details of editorial procedure. Hart was an extremely literate man who wrote with style and individuality. It was our primary law, of course, to let Hart speak as he in fact did; we never in any instances changed or omitted his words. In cases where his punctuation might have confused a modern reader, however, minor changes were made in the interest of clarity which were pointed out in an introductory

editorial note. Other procedures were settled upon in the course of this first reading.

Somewhat later, in the course of working with the original letters in London, it was noticed that the methodical Campbell had written at the top of each letter the date of its receipt by the London Office. As this was a circumstance of some interest to historians (how long had the letter been on the way? what had happened in the meantime, if anything, to change Campbell's reaction to it? and so forth), we decided to add that date in brackets below the date of the letter itself (again explained in the note).

While Mrs Matheson was reading the letters with these procedural details in mind and marking her copy for the typist, she was also watching for sections needing notes. Anything that she did not understand, any person mentioned—even family members at this stage—anything at all that would puzzle a reader must be explained. In addition it became obvious that there must be a preliminary note to explain at what point in their careers each of the correspondents found himself at the time the letters began.

There was still the question of where the notes were to be placed in relation to the letters. There seemed to be three choices: at the bottom of the page; at the end of each letter; at the back of the book. But when sample pages were submitted by the press, a fourth possibility was suggested: at the side of each page. For various reasons the first choice, which became the final one, was for the notes to follow each letter. Not only did this seem logical, but it avoided certain confusions in numbering. Each letter could have its own notes, numbered from 1; if any were deleted or added, even in galleys, there would be no need to change the numbering in other letters.

From time to time, when there seemed a mild accumulation of points at issue, the editors met over luncheon. Such meetings invariably included the working corps—Professor Fairbank, Mr Little, Mrs Matheson, and me—and occasionally other interested persons.

Categories of explanation

Circumstances revealed the need for several categories of explanation:

1. Brief notes essential for the immediate understanding of a letter, to follow that letter.
2. An explanation of such continuing institutions and events as form the context of the letters, these to be covered in an introduction. For the latter a list of topics was to be suggested by the various editors, dealing either with the organization and procedures of the Customs Service or with its background in Chinese political and historical institutions. As it turned out, later developments brought an expansion and reordering of this material. The Customs Service and Hart's place in it were treated at length by Mr Little in his introduction of some

thirty pages; Western contacts with China, including Hart and his enterprises, became the subject of a briefer foreword by Professor Fairbank.

3. Other kinds of explanation, in the form of maps and charts. It was obviously necessary to have a large map of China and its immediate neighbours, covering names of provinces, customs ports, and every place mentioned by Hart in his correspondence. (Subsequently two smaller maps, one of Peking in 1900, the other of the Legation Quarter, were added.) An organizational chart of the Customs Service was a necessary guide for the maze of promotions, transfers, and appointments covered in the letters; in final form it became not a chart but a list of official ranks within the service.

With basic decisions out of the way, the working index finished, and the letters of fascicle I in the hands of the typist, the major task of annotation began. The original presumption had been that the notes would be written by various specialists in Chinese and Customs affairs, each dealing with topics in the area of his own expert knowledge. However, it became obvious that many matters were too simple and easily elucidated to require an expert. The editors were not, as they frequently reminded themselves, writing a history of the period or posing original interpretations; they were simply making intelligible the content of one man's letters. So they themselves began the process, and anything that could be found in a book was found, and summarized, and extracted, and used. One of the complications avoided by undertaking the annotation ourselves was the threat to a uniform style; diverse experts would inevitably write notes in their own way, at their own length. The editorial problems of bringing such work into uniformity were complex. Outside commentators, moreover, would have no idea of what had been said in previous notes; some would be prompt, some not so prompt, and so on. In short, measuring headache for headache, we preferred to do the work in our own shop.

This involved, of course, the collection of a working library of essential references; in this case, books dealing with Westerners in China—borrowed, bought, or consulted in libraries. I myself became the bibliographical sleuth, haunting the lower reaches of Widener Library (where the Chinese section was located) and of the Harvard-Yenching Library (where the invaluable early files of the *North China Herald* were housed).

Parenthetically it should be noted that Mrs Matheson made it her practice never to read ahead more than one fascicle at a time; in other words, she refused to know more than a first reader would know. In this way, she felt, she could provide the information that would illuminate a given episode but without giving away its future climax, if it had one. In the lawsuit brought against Hart by a man named von Gumpach, for instance, there is a slow unfolding of its sequence and of

Hart's insistence upon its significance for Customs policy in China. Mentions in the letters extend from 1869 to the final decision in 1873. The notes first merely identify von Gumpach and explain the original verdict, which was appealed; they go on in the next year to Hart's choice of counsel for the appeal to the Privy Council; they continue through Campbell's efforts to unearth von Gumpach's somewhat shady earlier career; and only some forty letters later do they comment upon the outcome, after Hart himself had exulted over it. Such a step-by-step commentary was not invariably called for, and indeed was not always provided by Mrs Matheson. I myself of course could not be ignorant of final outcomes, since in putting together an index I had necessarily read the entire correspondence. But the hypothesis was an interesting one, and workable when adhered to by only part of the editorial staff.

The process of annotation

Seven stages can be distinguished in the process of annotation.

1. The first was the reading of the fascicle under consideration, to mark points requiring clarification. These were then divided roughly between Customs and general matters, on the one hand, and Chinese affairs—historical events and identifications—on the other; the latter was to be the province of Mrs Matheson as an editor of long standing dealing with publications on China. Although the arrangement broke down eventually under the strain of her illness, it nevertheless worked well as a starting scheme.

2. The notes were begun on 4"×6" cards. At the top of each was typed the number of the letter, its date, two page numbers (that of the original typescript and that of the retyped printer's copy), and the subject of the note. Thus:

<i>Letter 696</i>	<i>Page 1291</i>	<i>Child</i>
<i>1889</i>	<i>1348</i>	

Underneath was typed the suggested note, and below that the source of the information and any questions or comments. The first version of the note above, for example, read:

Alfred W. Child, possibly the younger brother of Thomas Child, Gas-Works Engineer, had joined the Customs in July 1888 as a Fitter.

When the card came to Mrs Matheson, she pencilled at the bottom: 'How long had the elder Child been in China—do you know? Index says "10 years in China in 1880." Can we say had been gas-works engineer for the Customs since 1870?' To which I in turn wrote, 'Yes; could be son or younger brother,' and rewrote the note:

Alfred W. Child had joined the Customs in July 1888 as a fitter. He was the son or younger brother of Thomas Child, who had been gas engineer for the Customs since 1870.

When each editor had finished the notes for a given fascicle, the cards were exchanged; my cards went to Mrs Matheson, who worked at home; she went through them, adding, querying, editing for uniformity, and then returned both hers and mine to me. When I had repeated the process with her cards, I sent them all in to Professor Fairbank, who at this point mainly corrected glaring errors or suggested further sources; his intensive work on the notes came later. The cards then came back to me.

3. From these cards I typed a rough version of the notes, a new page (or more) for each letter, on yellow paper. Part of the advantage of having the notes follow each letter came in the fact that the notes could then be sent to the printer as a separate entity, to be broken up and combined with the letters in page proof. To prevent confusion between copy for the letters and that for the notes, they were typed on paper of different colours. This first typed version was full of queries and puzzles, mainly addressed to Professor Fairbank.

4. Meanwhile the letters for that fascicle would have been typed for the printer, and proofread (both for errors in typing and for deviations from our agreed style of presentation) by one of the editors at the centre. When corrected they were photocopied, a copy for each of the three editors.

5. Now when our first yellow pages of notes were turned over to Professor Fairbank he had a copy of the relevant text to read along with them. Although he had sampled the letters, this was his first full reading, and provided one more check as to whether all points needing explanation were indeed explained, and to the proper degree. He wrote his comments, sometimes voluminous, on the yellow sheets. At times he was asked to supply a note; at other times he suggested likely regions for further research; sometimes he raised queries himself, coming on something unidentified and potentially confusing.

One of his problems was to identify the names of Chinese officials that were frequently written in Hart's own romanization at a time when the Wade-Giles system since established had not yet become generally accepted. Fortunately Hart was dealing usually with high officials, and the lists of official posts and incumbents and other research aids for the late nineteenth century were readily accessible in Professor Fairbank's seminar room on Ch'ing documents. While Hart was a fine student of Chinese and used the language as an administrative tool, it is evident that his administration was conducted mainly in English except when he was seeing Chinese officials. The fact that the Hart-Campbell correspondence was conducted on the periphery of Chinese affairs made the editorial task easier than it might have been.

6. Now we were ready for what might be the final version. I typed a second set on yellow paper, each letter's notes on a separate page, and inserted the numbers in the proper place in the photocopied text. When a last check had been made by each editor, and corrections inserted, the notes were ready for the printer.

7. Since this lengthy routine was applied to each of twelve fascicles (though without Mrs Matheson after about the mid-point), there might be at any one time several fascicles in various stages of preparation. Hence a master list was essential, showing where everything stood.

Of course, there were always overlapping lists of puzzles, continuing problems, points to be checked and in my case 'look up in library'. Recourse to originals and to official documents housed in London was also necessary.

When all twelve fascicles had been annotated and the puzzles subdued to a seemingly irreducible minimum, the letters and notes were delivered to the press. The editor there inevitably turned up a few more questions and inconsistencies; but since so much editing and proofing had already been accomplished at our end, and we had followed an agreed style sheet, the new points raised could be dealt with during the course of an afternoon or two.

Front and back matter

Meanwhile front and back matter had been prepared. A glossary was ready, with the characters for all the Chinese names and phrases mentioned in the letters. Hart for the most part used romanizations of Chinese names; in the somewhat rare instances where he added characters, a footnote explained that they could be found in the glossary. Thus the delays were avoided that would have resulted from insertion of characters within the text. Maps had been prepared, and photographs agreed upon and copied. An editorial note setting forth the procedures and ending with acknowledgments was on hand. We felt the need too for a few pages on the history of the correspondence itself—the vicissitudes of the letters in the years since Hart wrote them, the fate of Campbell's replies, and a few words about other sources of material on Hart.

Completing the index

The final index was a more major undertaking. For a series of letters containing so much varied information, so much of it potentially of great value to future researchers but by its nature disjointed and fragmentary, we felt an obligation to provide a detailed index. Every bit of information, every name (whether we had been able to identify its owner or not) must be retrievable. Indeed, the index turned out to be eighty-two pages of two columns each.

Earlier, during any intervals between jobs, I indexed the notes, which of course had not been in existence at the time the earlier working index was made. These too were indexed on slips of a different colour from those of the letters, and kept in chronological sequence. For various reasons, but high among them the advantage of not waiting to the last moment for page numbers, we decided to index everything by letter number rather than by page. Items within a letter and notes following it could thus be referred to together: 'Hoover, Herbert . . . 1274 and n2 [a reference to both letter and note], 1361n5 [a reference to the note alone].'

Here was where that second set of index cards, made at the time of the working index and set aside, came into use. While they were still in chronological order, letter numbers were substituted for the obsolete page numbers of the manuscript, note cards were inserted, and then the

whole put in alphabetical order. During the final typing, the old working index again proved its usefulness; not only was it possible to check the new against the old, item for item, but the warnings and hints set down during the course of the whole project prevented many a potential error.

The index completed and sent to the printer, nothing remained but to contain our souls in patience through the three months required for manufacture. In the end the volumes compensated for whatever during the years had seemed difficult or tedious. The two large volumes in the traditional green and gold of the Customs flag—green for the binding, gold for the endpapers—and the jacket with Hart's photograph and a panel from a holograph letter, seemed the right embodiment for all that was conveyed in the correspondence itself and that the editors had played a part in making available to readers.

The eternal triangle

Following the award of the Booker McConnell Prize for Fiction in October 1983, Fay Weldon, chairman of that year's panel of judges, delivered a spirited speech in which she explored some of the ambiguities of the relationship between authors and their publishers. She is a writer; her audience were largely publishers:

' . . . Writers know well enough that they are like Atlas, that they bear on their shoulders the entire literary world: all those who depend on the writer for their income, the exercise of their own particular skills, their status and their very jobs. Publishers, booksellers, editors, librarians, journalists, academics, festival organizers, Arts Councils and so forth. Only criminals have the same kind of responsibility. Each errant act, as each act of creativity, sits at the bottom of an inverted triangle—prison officers, prison governors, prison architects, probation officers, criminologists, the whole judiciary, the Home Office—criminals, like artists, create an amazing amount of work for an amazing number of people . . . We are the raw material of your trade . . . You use what is in our heads. You use us: the living us: and you don't, quite frankly, look after your raw material very well . . . '

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Indexers, who may at times experience similar feelings of wry exasperation with our beloved bread-and-butter, the publishers; or perhaps with the writers, on whom we, also, depend; may like to compare Charles Lamb's answer (in a letter of 9 January 1823) to Bernard Barton, a noted poet of the day, who wished to give up his job at a bank and turn full-time author; booksellers being at the time normally their own publishers:

'Throw yourself upon the world without any rational plan of support, beyond what the chance employ of booksellers would afford you!!!

'Throw yourself rather, my dear Sir, from the steep Tarpeian rock slap-dash headlong upon iron spikes. If you had but five consolatory minutes between the desk and the bed, make much of them, and live a century in them, rather than turn slave to the Booksellers. They are Turks and Tartars, when they have poor authors at their beck . . . [Authorship is] a pretty appendage to a situation like yours or mine, but a slavery, worse than all slavery, to be a booksellers' dependant, to drudge your brains for pots of ale and breasts of mutton, to change your free thoughts and voluntary numbers for ungracious task-work. Those fellows hate *us* . . . in *our* work the world gives all the credit to us, whom *they* consider as *their* journeymen, and therefore do they hate us, and cheat us, and oppress us, and would wring the blood of us out to put another sixpence in their mechanic pouches! I contend that a Bookseller has a *relative honesty* towards Authors, not like his honesty to the rest of the world. B— who first engag'd me as "Elia", has not paid me up yet . . . Yet I daresay the fellow is punctual in settling his milk-score, &c . . . '

Barton decided to (in Lamb's words) 'Keep his Bank, and his Bank would keep him'.

J.L.B.

