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War on Record: The Archive and the Afterlife of the Civil War. By Yael A. Sternhell

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“If the work is to be of real historical value, if it is to be any credit to the country, it should be well edited,” proclaimed Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts in an exchange in the U.S. Senate held on May 24, 1866. The debate centered on a joint resolution meant “to insure the publication in proper form, and at the least possible expense, of the reports and orders of commanding officers, and of all correspondence by telegraph or otherwise, and of all other documents of every description relating to the late rebellion, accumulated in the archives of the War Department since the 1st of December, 1860,” that would fulfill the purpose of a congressional resolution adopted on May 19, 1864. Attempting to garner support, Wilson explained that the object of the prospective multivolume work “was to perpetuate the proud record made by the armies of the Republic in their efforts for the maintenance of the Union, and to furnish a means for historical reference and professional instruction, by the compilation and publication in a compact, convenient, and permanent form of what may be termed the official military history of the rebellion.” Wilson’s presentation prompted worried remarks from Senators Charles Sumner of Massachusetts and William Pitt Fessenden of Maine that employing a supervisor at an annual salary of \$2,500 for two years would be woefully insufficient given the immense number of records. It would be better to do nothing than overwhelm an individual and produce poor-quality books without proper indexes that made finding desired information virtually impossible. Senator Henry B. Anthony then interjected to call for more staff, saying “it would take twenty men to perform that work as it ought to be performed.” Sumner then observed that the ideal supervisor would be very hard to find: “He must be a man without any of the turbulent ambition that

belongs to politicians; he must be disposed to quiet, willing to live at home with his books and his papers, and give himself day and night to serious toil.” Fessenden followed with a quip that Sumner should resign and take charge of the project, prompting a parry from Sumner that “the work will surely be done” only if Fessenden actually acted on his thought to serve as Sumner’s clerk.¹ This debate illuminated the thinking of senators on the challenges of undertaking a massive collaborative editing project but only resulted in a referral of the matter back to committee for more study.

Sustained activities on the compilation finally began after a congressional allocation of \$15,000 in June 1874, and the early work evidently was done according to a capacious guiding principle “that it is better to embody too much than too little.”² Once started in earnest, the effort to publish records from the Civil War continued without significant interruption for just over a quarter of a century. When it ended in 1901, the edition—formally titled *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* but known familiarly as the *OR*—numbered 70 volumes in 128 books.

While the subject of several articles and overviews, this widely known and highly influential publication has lacked a book-length study until Yael A. Sternhell’s *War on Record: The Archive and the Afterlife of the Civil War*.³ The first paragraph of the introduction foregrounds Sternhell’s purpose: “This book tells the story of an archive. That archive is composed of the official records created during the Civil War and collected by the Federal government in the war’s long and uncertain aftermath. . . . The enduring legacy of the Civil War and its continued hold on the American imagination make this body of records in all likelihood the most consequential archival collection to have ever been assembled, organized, and ultimately published in the United States. It is high time that it be treated as a historical subject in its own right rather than simply utilized as an object for telling other stories” (1).

Sternhell focuses on the big picture of bringing the *OR* to fruition. She considers archival practices prevalent during the period, how leaders of the project and their biases shaped the compilation, and the outsized role that Union and Confederate veterans played in impeding or facilitating progress as well as molding its contours. The correspondence of those who led the initiative—found in Records Groups 94, 107, 109, and 159 of the National Archives and the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill—provide the bulk of the primary sources and create a top-down emphasis. Editorial practices receive minimal attention, but Sternhell uses documentary editing concepts without consciously realizing the fact when she describes how the *OR* was shaped. Selection was “made by a group of Gilded Age military bureaucrats” who also depended on “officers who dug up their old records, provided missing facts, deciphered telegrams, and vouched for the veracity of their handwriting” largely to satisfy an audience of veterans who wanted their exploits known and remembered (9).⁴

In exploring her chosen topics, Sternhell sheds light on the obstacles and challenges that the leading figures faced and overcame. Civil War records had not been maintained in a coordinated fashion and needed to be brought together from various places. Some remained in the possession of officers and officials who had scattered across the country. It often proved difficult to gain access to these items. Records stored wherever space could be found in buildings around Washington, DC, suffered from inattention, and damage occurred from water and vermin. Erratic funding and indefinite staffing prevented consistent

attention to the tasks of compiling documents and arranging for their publication, especially through the project's first decade. Different thoughts on how to organize and present the records also hindered progress. The first plan was to present various kinds of documents—reports, correspondence, telegrams—according to type in chronological sequence. Prioritizing document types over events meant that finding content related to any battle or campaign would require researchers to consult multiple volumes and arduously pull together related materials. Concern over this publication approach in part prompted the Senate debate in May 1866, and it eventually was abandoned for a topical organization.

The individuals who played the largest roles in bringing the *OR* to completion can be designated heroes and villains (even though Sternhell does not use these terms). In the fall of 1863 Major General Henry W. Halleck, Union army chief of staff, proposed a comprehensive chronological compilation of military records both to assist him in his reporting duties and for historical purposes. He has the honor of inaugurating the idea. Francis Lieber, Halleck's friend and an expert in military law, first sought to bring order to the undifferentiated masses of Union and Confederate documents at the close of the war. His handling and examination of the material concentrated on finding evidence of Confederate wrongdoing, particularly connivance in President Abraham Lincoln's assassination. Political factors led to Lieber's departure, and for several years Adjutant General Edward D. Townsend oversaw work. He interpreted the congressional charge as narrowly as possible and sought to publish only the official reports that officers prepared after engagements. These reports sometimes were written long after events and could not be assessed for accuracy without the full documentary record found in coterminous orders, telegrams, and correspondence. Sternhell portrays Townsend in a harsh light and applauds John D. Defrees, head of the Government Printing Office, for stopping the publication of the incomplete manuscript Townsend had presented to fulfill the mandate to print records.

A series of army officers directed what came to be known as the War Records Office after regular congressional funding began in 1874, but no officer put his stamp on the project until Major Robert N. Scott took over in 1878. Scott emerges as the true hero of the *OR*. He joined full knowledge of military bureaucracy to a historical awareness that valued original documents. His decisions gave the *OR* its final shape. Scott shifted the organization from document types to topics and decreed that the publication would be selective rather than comprehensive. Only documents created during the war and "designed to influence official action" would be included. This standard omitted "several classes of documents, including applications for appointments, contracts, charges of disloyalty, claims, tenders of troops, and unsolicited advice" (128). Scott's innovations also encompassed the division of published materials into series, with Series I (by far the largest) covering military events; Series II addressing prisoners of war; and Series III and IV capturing items that did not fit into the first two series ("like the correspondence between the Federal and state governments and special reports by the army's senior leadership") for the United States (III) and Confederate (IV) governments (126). Perhaps most significantly, Scott ended an impasse between the War Records Office and the Southern Historical Society that opened channels for a free exchange of documents between bodies representing the interests of former combatants. The hiring of Marcus J. Wright, previously a Confederate general, as a full-time agent resulted in the procurement of items from people like Jefferson Davis and Jubal Early. Scott's motivation for involving prominent ex-Confederates was filling out the record so the full picture could be presented of what was thought and done during the war.

While Scott and Wright receive credit from Sternhell for expanding the source base and overall value of the *OR*, Brigadier General Fred C. Ainsworth, the last director, draws criticisms for being overly driven to achieve efficiency and rapid publication. His arrival cut the number of volumes in Series II from seventeen to eight and brought to a prompt close in 1901 an endeavor that some observers believed had no end in sight and had cost too much. Ainsworth already had won acclaim for his management of the Record and Pension Office, and he believed that he quickened the pace of output on the *OR* by eliminating excess staff and getting those who remained to spend less time talking about the war and more time working.⁵

Sternhell's accomplishments in this book are notable. She fully exploits the War Records Office archives to explain the wending history of the *OR*'s creation and how the interests and biases of key leaders both shaped and misshaped the final published archive. Her argument is convincing that the contents emphasize major battles because that is what veterans—both Union and Confederate—wanted to see and read. Also convincing is Sternhell's related argument that the process of sharing documents that were then published together assisted in the reconciliation between North and South, which had problematic consequences for many in a society becoming legally segregated. At a more basic historiographical level, Sternhell explains how the kinds of documents that Scott decided to omit—especially charges of disloyalty and claims for compensation to pay for damaged property—impeded study of the social aspects of the Civil War and issues of race, class, and gender. Those interested in battles and leaders can find a great deal in the *OR*. Those seeking information on the experience of escaped or emancipated slaves, guerilla operations, insurgencies, or the home front likely will be disappointed because the voices of civilians and others not in the ranks have been muted through an official policy of exclusion.⁶

Shortcomings in Sternhell's book center on the cursory attention she gives to staffing and workplace dynamics as well as a failure to probe principal documentary editing practices. Sternhell observes that the lack of "service records for the clerks" deterred her from undertaking an analysis of personnel (220–21). Being so focused on archives apparently caused her to overlook what can be found in sources outside the archive. The federal government published a register of its employees biannually through the period of the *OR*'s creation. That publication shows a dramatic rise in staff from five men working in the "Archives Branch" in September 1877 to twenty-one men and twenty-two women working within a unit called "Publication of the Official Records of the War of the Rebellion" in 1881.⁷ The staff reached its peak size in 1893 when an array of assistants, indexers, clerks, compilers, proofreaders, copyists, examiners of archives, printers, messengers, and watchmen—to name only a portion of the job titles—added up to 137 individuals (75 being women) working in the War Records Office.⁸

The government registers provide the names of 105 women who worked on the *OR*, and their number likely was larger because the biannual publications missed those employed only during the intervening years. These women were married and single and came from across the United States. At least eleven worked for more than six years. Searches on Ancestry.com show that two were members of the Daughters of the American Revolution; two were the wives or widows of former U.S. soldiers; and one, Octavia Womack, was the sister-in-law of Marcus Wright, the agent for procuring Confederate records. As was true for nearly all women who worked as federal employees, the women received lower pay for the same work as their male counterparts and navigated a space still thought inappropriate for their sex. Moreover, Harrison Terrell, who began his life enslaved and had served as Ulysses S. Grant's butler for four years prior to the latter's death,

received recommendations from the Grant family and worked for over a decade in the War Records Office, initially as a laborer and then as an assistant messenger.⁹ He probably was not the only Black man in the office, and the mix of races, genders, backgrounds, and skills certainly could have made for a fraught working environment that had an impact on the final product. Sternhell missed an opportunity to at least speculate suggestively.¹⁰

From the perspective of documentary editors, Sternhell's treatment of selection and transcription in the *OR* falls far short. She acknowledges that *OR* compilers did not in many cases have access to the original documents or the recipient copies of letters and instead worked from copies made during the war or at a much later date by the person possessing the record. These last variants were used with only a certification by the creator giving it stature as an official record on par with those created during the war. Source notes do not appear in the *OR* so readers never know what version served as copytext. Tracking down this information clearly is beyond the scope of Sternhell's book, but she could have pointed to the source notes with information on all variants, as well as the location of the document in the *OR*, in *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, edited by John Y. Simon, vols. 2–14. Another benefit of the Simon edition is being able to see the many letters and telegrams from the war years that did not find their way into the *OR*. This information illuminates to some degree the selection criteria used by the compilers.

A preface to the *OR General Index* provides a convenient overview of the project's administrative history, but it more importantly offers a statement of the publication's transcription policy: "A uniform style of composition has been adopted, and this has necessitated certain unimportant departures from the original records in such minor items as those of spelling, punctuation, abbreviation and capitalization, but these changes are merely typographical. . . . Paragraphing has not been strictly followed as in the original documents, short paragraphs having been consolidated, whenever practicable, to economize space. 'Burgh' has been uniformly printed 'burg,' 'boro' has been printed 'borough,' and other similar typographical rules for uniformity of spelling have been followed, but the greatest caution has been invariably observed to guard against any change in the language or meaning of the documents."¹¹ The transcription policy sounds benign, but its execution does not fulfill the promise. Documentary editors know all too well how easily altered punctuation—not to mention outright errors—can skew emphasis, obscure a point, or change meaning. The likelihood for botches becomes greater when contending with masses of documents and dozens of different copyists and proofreaders, as was the case with the *OR*.¹²

The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant employed a quite literal transcription policy, and transcription from that edition can be used as a ready way to suggest the extent and significance of deviations from the original manuscript in the *OR*. Given the copytext uncertainties in the *OR*, it is best to look at a letter with only one known version. Grant's autograph letter signed to Lincoln on July 25, 1864, is such a document. It begins in the *OR*: "After the late raid into Maryland had expended itself, seeing the necessity of having the four departments of the Susquehanna, the Middle, West Virginia, and Washington, under one head, I recommended that they be merged into one, and named General Franklin as a suitable person to command the whole." The transcription in *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* includes quotation marks and capitalization that convey directly that a change to a formal administrative structure had been proposed: "After the late raid into Maryland had expended itself, seeing the necessity of having the four Departments of 'The

Susquehanna,' 'The Middle,' 'Western Va.' and 'Washington' under one head, I recommended that they be merged into one, and named Gen. Franklin as a suitable person to command the whole."

Collapsed paragraphs and altered or dropped commas distort information in the body of the letter on the sensitivity attached to prospective personnel changes. Omitted quotation marks and a transcription mistake that added "here" in the *OR* near the close of the letter worsen matters by indicating that Grant is referring to some other developments at his headquarters rather than changed leadership assignments: "I send this by Brigadier-General Rawlins, chief of staff, who will be able to give more information of the situation here than I could give you in a letter." The transcription in *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* reads: "I send this by Brig. Gen. Rawlins, Chief of Staff, who will be able to give more information of 'the situation' than I could give in a letter."¹³ Such comparisons between transcriptions in the *OR* and *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* can be multiplied, but one suffices to show that Sternhell should have been more reluctant to accept the prevailing sentiment that the content rendered in the *OR* is fundamentally sound.

The *OR* stands as an early large-scale collaborative editing project conducted under the auspices of the federal government, and it confronted the same challenges and pressures known to later collaborative editing projects primarily funded with federal dollars. Questions related to leadership, staffing, process, presentation, and pace—as well as whether the money would be available to do the material justice—puzzle those with modern projects just as much as those with the *OR*. Sternhell is right to view the *OR* as both an archival achievement and one with flaws "deeply rooted in specific cultural contexts" (222). Some defects have been overcome. For instance, the *OR*'s *General Index* has been criticized for emphasizing names to satisfy veterans while excluding almost everything else, but computer keyword searching has enhanced discoverability and essentially eliminated that limitation. What might those working on the *OR* have done with computers? Technological progress, especially artificial intelligence, poses a similar question for all currently engaged in documentary editing.

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1. *Congressional Globe*, 39th Cong., 1st sess., pp. 2804–7. ↩
 2. *Report of the Secretary of War . . .* (Nov. 22, 1875), in *House Executive Document*, 44th Cong., 1 sess., no. 1, part 2, pp. 24–25. ↩
 3. For notable shorter studies, all known to Sternhell, see Dallas D. Irvine, "The Genesis of the *Official Records*," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 24 (1937): 221–29; Irvine, *Military Operations of the Civil War: A Guide-Index to the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 1861–1865*, vol. 1: Conspectus (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Series, General Services Administration, 1977); Harold E. Mahan, "The Arsenal of History: *The Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*," *Civil War History* 29 (1983): 5–27; and Michael P. Musick, "Honorable Reports: Battles, Campaigns, and Skirmishes—Civil War Records and Research," *Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives* 27 (Fall 1995): 258–77. ↩
 4. For the longstanding categories of editorial practice—audience, search, selection, transcription, annotation, indexing—see the index entries in Beth Luey, *Editing Documents and Texts: An Annotated Bibliography* (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1990). ↩

5. See Mabel E. Deutrich, *Struggle for Supremacy: The Career of General Fred C. Ainsworth* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1962), especially 61–62. ↩
6. For the recovery of documentary records related to Blacks during the Civil War era, see Ira Berlin, Steven Hahn, René Hayden, et al., eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867*, Ser. 1, 3 vols., and Ser. 2, 1 vol. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1982–93), and Ser. 3, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008–13). See also <https://freedmen.umd.edu>. ↩
7. *Register of Officers and Agents, Civil, Military, and Naval, in the Service of the United States on the Thirtieth of September, 1877 . . .* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1878), 193; and *Official Register of the United States, Containing a List of Officers and Employés in the Civil, Military, and Naval Service on the First of July, 1881 . . .*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1881), 413–14. ↩
8. *Official Register of the United States, Containing a List of the Officers and Employés in the Civil, Military, and Naval Service on the First of July, 1893 . . .*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1893), 500–502. ↩
9. See Ulysses S. Grant to Harrison Terrell, June 2, 1885, in *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, ed. John Y. Simon, 32 vols. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967–2012), 31:370; *Official Register of the United States, Containing a List of the Officers and Employés in the Civil, Military, and Naval Service on the First of July, 1887 . . .*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1887), 392; *Official Register of the United States, Containing a List of the Officers and Employees in the Civil, Military, and Naval Service . . . July 1, 1897*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1897), 521. ↩
10. For useful studies that could have been exploited, see Cindy Sondik Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen of the Civil Service: Middle-Class Workers in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), and Jessica Ziparo, *This Grand Experiment: When Women Entered the Federal Workforce in Civil War–Era Washington, D.C.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017). ↩
11. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies . . . General Index and Additions and Corrections* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1901), xvii–xviii. ↩
12. The difficulty in implementing a transcription policy that called for silent emendations of historical documents was a central contention in G. Thomas Tanselle’s influential analysis in “The Editing of Historical Documents,” an article published in *Studies in Bibliography* 31 (1978): 1–56, republished in his collection titled *Selected Studies in Bibliography* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1979), 451–506. Tanselle’s views were critiqued by the author of this review essay in “Transcription Is Serious Business: G. Thomas Tanselle’s ‘The Editing of Historical Documents,’” a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Documentary Editing, Springfield, IL (2009). ↩

13. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1891), Series I, vol. 37, part 2, 433–34; Simon, *Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, 11:308–10. ↩