

Editing Death

An Element of Craft

Ann D. Gordon

When it came time to design the sixth and final volume of the *Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony*, I realized that I knew nothing at all about how editors handled the deaths of their principal subjects and concluded their editions. I had never been on an editorial team at the subject's moment of death; moreover, I had not encountered talks or essays by colleagues about editing death. With two deaths upcoming in the volume, I needed models for the end of life in editions of a person's papers. The whole staff set out to survey the field. Quite unexpectedly, a query about death opened windows onto editorial styles. In their handling of death, editors can only create an ending from finite and disparate compilations of sources. But through their varied designs, as we read the work, editors manifested decisions about the arts of narrative, claims about the significance of their subject's life, and emotions about ending a long partnership and collaboration. This is an attempt to start the conversation we once needed.¹

Take a case in point. Elizabeth Cady Stanton died on October 26, 1902, in her apartment on Ninety-Fourth Street in New York City. In her last surviving private letter, dated September 30, Stanton proposed a long-range plan: "As I was wide awake last night for hours, when I should have been asleep, I thought of you," she told the journalist Ida Harper, as the person best qualified to "give the finishing touch" to a volume of her speeches. "Now tell me," she wrote, "if you think you will be able to edit my book."² Though Stanton, approaching her eighty-seventh birthday, found it extremely difficult to move around and could no longer see, there were few indications to people outside her family that her end was nigh. In the public sphere, readers of William Randolph Hearst's *New York American and Journal* found Stanton's byline on articles published in July, August, September,

and even on October 13.³ In other words, narrative in Stanton's own documents runs against the current that carries an omniscient editor to the conclusion.

Had I edited books comprised solely of Stanton's papers, these would be sources from which to construct an ending to my book and Stanton's life. At the September 30 missive to Ida Harper, I would wrestle with whether to foreshadow death by noting that it was the last known private letter. At the October 13 newspaper article, the question of when she wrote it would loom, if it were to be my book's final text. Then what? How would Stanton die? Some editors introduce their subject's last will and testament at this point. Though surely written earlier than its placement indicates, the will at its moment of legal activation signifies its author's passing. My sources fail me: Stanton left no will that might become the final text. At that point, many editors step forward either to recount the death themselves or to introduce historical witnesses. Stanton could die in a footnote, maybe anchored awkwardly on the article of October 13: "in thirteen days, she would be dead." She could die in an editorial note that stood apart from the texts. She got married that way: in the surviving texts of 1840 she broke off her engagement and then sailed on her honeymoon. Editors bridged that gap and made it legal. Here at the end of life, when Stanton's papers omit her life's turns and endings, the editor might step in to put finis to the narrative. As a matter of fact, in a solo edition of Stanton's papers, death and texts cannot be made to reach a common end point. Stanton wrote so fast and furiously in 1902 that her papers flowed on seamlessly beyond her death. If Stanton's papers were allowed to run their course—fall into their chronological slots until the supply ran out—her death would disappear into an inflexible progression of papers. Something should be said.

At the Stanton and Anthony Papers, we decided to take our questions about editing death to a list of completed historical editions. Staff members asked, what is the final document and why? How does a reader learn that the subject died and when death arrived? Are the circumstances of the death regarded as worthy of description? Are the boundaries of what constitute the subject's "papers" expanded for the occasion in order to incorporate new points of view, through memorials, condolences, and obituaries? They looked at some two dozen editions, both selective and comprehensive in scope. Though it was possible to draw up clear descriptions of what the editors put into print, we could only infer what governed their choices.

From this informal survey, they discovered that readers learn about deaths in a variety of ways, sometimes by more than one way in a single volume. It might be that the date and cause of death are given in an introductory essay. If the device of a chronology is employed, death usually makes its appearance in that list. If the volume is conceived as a series of chapters each opened with a preface, death may be foreshadowed at the final chapter's start. What seems the most obvious way—to face the fact of death in the book's core of texts and annotation—is not the most popular way. By and large, editors seem to cluster near one of two stylistic poles. On the one hand, they end their volumes with the last letter or memorandum or other paper of the subject, no matter how long before (or after) its author's death; on the other hand, they admit new witnesses—a wife or daughter, an aide, an official's announcement, a newspaper's obituary—through which to narrate the final weeks or days or moments.

At one pole, to pick but a single example, the staff observed that the two-volume *Selected Letters of Charles Sumner* stops with a letter dated March 9, 1874, without explanation. Is this the last known letter by Sumner or the last one selected by the editor? How much time passed before Sumner died? In fact, the date of Sumner's death (March 11) is nowhere reported in the volume where texts of 1874 appear.⁴ At an extreme of this style, not even the editor bears witness to death. At the opposite pole, consider the *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*. The final book of this three volume edition winds down slowly. The last letter by Debs is dated June 3, 1926, four and a half months before he died. Rather than stop there, the editors selected a series of letters written over the summer by well-wishers and followed them with letters of condolence to Eugene's brother Theodore Debs. With the first letter of condolence, a footnote places Eugene's death at October 20, 1926.⁵ In the middle ground, one could look at *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*. The last selection is also Alcott's last text, written on the morning of her fatal stroke, facts the reader learns in a concise footnote.⁶

Narrative is a word of variable stature and fashion among historians but kind of basic to the chronological scholarship of texts and documents and papers. Most editors are quite clear that they are not *the* narrator of their edition but rather work in collaboration with the principal subject of their work. The editor's narrative is more akin to the biographer's than to the storyteller's.⁷ There is, first, the objective limitation of available material, though that limit is not hard and fast, especially in

a selective edition or one that admits witnesses. As the *Papers of Joseph Henry* draws to a close and the last of his letters is placed in the volume, the editors add a text so perfect for the purpose that any editor will envy their find. The scientist and college professor Maria Mitchell visits Henry in the last weeks of his life and records in her journal their conversation about facing death. Their book then closes with a single letter between two of Henry's friends that efficiently recounts Henry's final days and announces plans for a funeral.⁸

Another influence on an editor's style of narration emerges from the professional but subjective measure of the importance of the life edited. It will surprise no one to learn that Arthur S. Link edited death on the grandest scale when he reached the conclusion of the *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*. The ending is consistent with Link's passionate loyalty to Woodrow Wilson, and it suggests ways that rational measures of importance become entangled in the difficult emotions of parting company with one's life work. After all, Wilson dies in the sixty-eighth volume, every one of them edited by Link. The former president dictated letters on January 25, 1924, and a secretary noted on the carbon copy (and the editors quoted in a footnote) that the text was one of the last letters dictated by a man too ill to sign the sent copies. The secretary's notation, augmented perhaps by the exact date of death, would conclude many an edition in a concise and graceful way. But Link and his team were not content to conclude their work at that anticlimactic point. They admit several witnesses and include daily bulletins about Wilson's decline that were sent out to the public until he died on February 3. Befitting the importance of the occasion, the story extends to selected letters about the funeral, to indicate that President Coolidge will attend and that Wilson's widow instructed Henry Cabot Lodge to stay away.⁹

Because the *Selected Papers of Stanton and Anthony* is a joint edition of two friends, one woman was bound to witness the death of the other. As things turned out, Susan B. Anthony became the resident witness to the death of her friend. Through the papers of Anthony, Stanton's decline and death are documented as a matter of course, as a disturbing event in her own life, without editorial intervention or quests for external witnesses. The edition's narrative style stays intact. A letter to Anthony from Stanton's daughter Harriot Blatch in September 1902 tempers the hopeful note of Stanton's own letter in the same week. After describing her mother as greatly weakened and in constant need of a daughter's

attention, Harriot urges Anthony to visit New York City for Stanton's birthday in November, "as I'm sure there wont be another."¹⁰ Readers of the *Selected Papers* learn of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's death in the same way Susan B. Anthony did, by telegram from Harriot Blatch: "Mother passed away today."¹¹ With her arrival in New York City on October 27, Anthony becomes the witness to the family's grief, the private funeral in their apartment, and a larger ceremony at Woodlawn Cemetery. As an editor, I could not possibly improve upon the witness Anthony became. On the day of the funeral, she described her loss in terms of science and human reason.

Well, it is an awful hush—it seems impossible—that the voice is hushed—that I have longed to hear for 50 years—longed to get her opinion of things—before I knew exactly where I stood— It is all at sea—but the Laws of Nature are still going on—with no shadow or turning— What a world it is—it goes right on & on—no matter who lives or who dies!!

In the same letter, she also directs readers to aspects of the public and political response to Stanton's death, critiquing how poorly journalists understood Stanton's cause and marveling, after telegrams arrived from England, that "The whole world knows of the fact!"¹²

But what happens when the *Selected Papers* reaches the moment of Susan B. Anthony's death on March 13, 1906, at her home on Madison Street in Rochester? In this death, the more usual laws of editing apply, and the papers of Susan B. Anthony, when narrowly defined, offer nothing to document her death. For more than a month, her decline was national news. She reached Baltimore on February 4 with a terrible cold, and reports of her ill health were incorporated into daily coverage of the annual convention of the National-American Woman Suffrage Association there. In the care of a private nurse, she managed a trip to Washington on February 15 and sat on the stage for her eighty-sixth birthday celebration; a few words uttered on that occasion bring an end to her papers.¹³ Traveling north toward home, with a nurse still at her side, Anthony broke an engagement to celebrate her birthday again with suffragists in New York City. That too made the news. Susan B. Anthony's silence after leaving Washington caught the attention of the national press corps and a crowd of reporters gathered on Madison Street.

Daily briefings for them in front of her house tracked her decline, as these headlines illustrate.

Pawtucket Times, March 6: "Susan B. Anthony May Not Recover"

Dallas Morning News, March 7: "Miss Susan B. Anthony Ill"

Albuquerque Journal, March 11: "Susan B. Anthony Worse"

From inside the house, a niece kept close friends apprised of her condition in neatly typed letters. In the *Selected Papers*, we admitted new witnesses during Anthony's month of silent decline. Except insofar as we had admitted journalists' accounts of their speeches and interviews, the concluding pages of the sixth volume depart from a strict commitment to using only words sent to or authored by Stanton and Anthony. Having decided to open that door, it was a matter of selecting texts by women who had access to Anthony's bedroom, who may have written for an effect of their own but who had firsthand information. Two letters by the niece trace false hopes of improvement and reveal how family members edited the news allowed to reach Anthony. Those are followed by her doctor's statement to the press on March 6, 1906.¹⁴ And for the moment of death, we had an unusual source. In 1981, when the project announced its search for the papers of Stanton and Anthony in *Yankee Magazine*, a family sent us a letter from a young nurse named Mabel Nichols who trained in Massachusetts. While in Rochester visiting friends at the nursing school, Nichols was hired as Susan B. Anthony's night nurse. On the morning of her patient's death, she described the events for her sister back home, ending her letter (and our volume) with disputed claims for proximity to the dead. "The paper gives the names of the parties that were at the death bed, but to tell the truth Maude I was all alone with the dear old soul."¹⁵

When I first wrote a short piece about editing death for the *Project Newsletter* of the Stanton and Anthony Papers, one editor sent me a defense of "the abrupt end to the letters" at an edition's conclusion, meaning to end an edition without reference to the fact of death. I inferred that because Clara Barton (let's pretend we speak of her) makes no mention of her own death, the style does not permit Barton's editor to step in with information deemed extraneous to the text of each letter or other document. The kind of narrative that frames a life—her birth, her death—is segregated into editorial apparatus in essays, chronologies, and chapter

headings. It is as if Clara Barton wrote one narrative in a life of letters and her editor wrote another. Such a bifurcation assumes an impossible distance between editor and subject, imagines that an editorial voice is not expressed in the arrangement of Clara Barton's narrative. The editor's hand and voice is all over the editions, working in collaboration with the subject, whether overtly or not. An intervention to let the subject die in train seems no more than to extend a slight courtesy.

While I contemplated how to edit the deaths of Stanton and Anthony in ways consistent with the edition, I forgot to consult *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, though the six volumes occupy a shelf at eye level near my most comfortable chair. Woolf's dramatic death introduces new considerations. As a textual artifact, the suicide note overturns my original premise, that a person's papers are pretty useless for documenting his or her own death. Such a note brings the reader closer to the end of the author's life than whatever random letter or note gets the editor's attention for an ending. In the nearly thirty years since I last read the final volume of the *Letters*, I forgot how tightly the narratives of Woolf and her editors are woven at the end. It happens that in the papers of Virginia Woolf, there is not one suicide note but three. For Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, editing death entailed careful textual scholarship.¹⁶

Virginia Woolf had written two notes to her husband, Leonard, and one to her sister, Vanessa Bell. None was dated, though two of them indicated (different) days of the week. Two different tablets of paper had been used. The family—her husband Leonard and Quentin Bell, Virginia's nephew and biographer—settled on a chronology and explanation for the multiple notes that were all found at once. Her editors questioned the chronology, assigned three different tentative dates to the notes, and in their words “dat[ed] the stages by which she reached her decision” (491). If they are correct (and I do not pretend to evaluate their work), their chronology introduces evidence of a failed suicide. In the simple act of editing death, the editors potentially revised the narrative of death, that most certain of things.

Notes

1. Ann D. Gordon, Michael David Cohen, Sara Rzeszutek Haviland, Andy Bowers, and Katharine Lee, eds., *Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony*, vol. 6, *An Awful Hush, 1895 to 1906* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013). Kathleen E. Manning was also part of the team during this exercise.
2. Gordon, *An Awful Hush, 1895 to 1906*, 435–37.
3. For her articles of April 20 and October 13, see Gordon, *An Awful Hush, 1895 to 1906*, 430–32, 441–46. For all articles published in 1902, see Patricia G. Holland and Ann D. Gordon, eds., *Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1991, microfilm).
4. Beverly Wilson Palmer, ed., *The Selected Letters of Charles Sumner*, 2 vols. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 2:631.
5. J. Robert Constantine, ed., *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, vol. 3, 1919–1926 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 581–82, 601.
6. Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy, eds., *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1987), 337.
7. For ideas about biographical narration, see Leon Edel, *Literary Biography* (1959; reprint, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), especially chap. 5, "Time."
8. Marc Rothenberg et al., eds., *The Papers of Joseph Henry*, vol. 11, *January 1866–May 1878, The Smithsonian Years* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2007), 653–55.
9. Arthur S. Link, John E. Little, and L. Kathleen Amon, eds., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 68, *April 8, 1922–February 6, 1924* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 547ff.
10. September 25, 1902, Gordon, *An Awful Hush, 1895 to 1906*, 434–35.
11. October 26, 1902, Gordon, *An Awful Hush, 1895 to 1906*, 452.
12. To Ida H. Harper, October 28, 1902, in Gordon, *An Awful Hush, 1895 to 1906*, 455–56.
13. Gordon, *An Awful Hush, 1895 to 1906*, xxix–xxx, 577–78.

14. Lucy E. Anthony to Ida H. Harper, February 28, 1906, and to Elizabeth Smith Miller, March 2, 1906, and Statement by Dr. Marcena Sherman Ricker, March 6, 1906, all in Gordon, *An Awful Husb, 1895 to 1906*, 579–81.
15. Mabel Nichols to Maude Nichols, March 13, 1906, in Gordon, *An Awful Husb, 1895 to 1906*, 581–82.
16. “The Dating of Virginia Woolf’s Last Letters,” appendix A in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, vol. 6, *1936–1941* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 489–91.