

The Death of The Footnote

(Report on an Exaggeration)

Like reports of Mark Twain's death, those announcing the demise of the footnote have been somewhat exaggerated. But if not dead, the footnote, and its uses, are generally misunderstood. Our author explains.

by Anthony Grafton

For a few weeks in the late summer and early fall of 1996, men bit dogs. Well, not quite, but something almost as surprising happened. Footnotes grabbed headlines. An article in the *New York Times* informed astonished readers that a controversy had broken out on this uncompromisingly obscure subject. Many scholars, the reporter claimed, are turning away from footnotes. Experienced historians, intent on communicating with their readers, spurn annotations as excess baggage weighing down their lively prose. Distinguished literary scholars, intent on exploring their own experiences in personal essays, see no need to waste space on traditional forms of documentation. Once upon a time, extensive footnotes identified their authors as veteran explorers of libraries and archives. Now they merely reveal the pedantry of young writers trying, and failing, to find the elegant outlines of readable books in the rough stone blocks of their dissertations. Songs of experience have become songs of innocence.

University presses traditionally specialized in bringing out books in which a thick overgrowth of footnotes covered, and

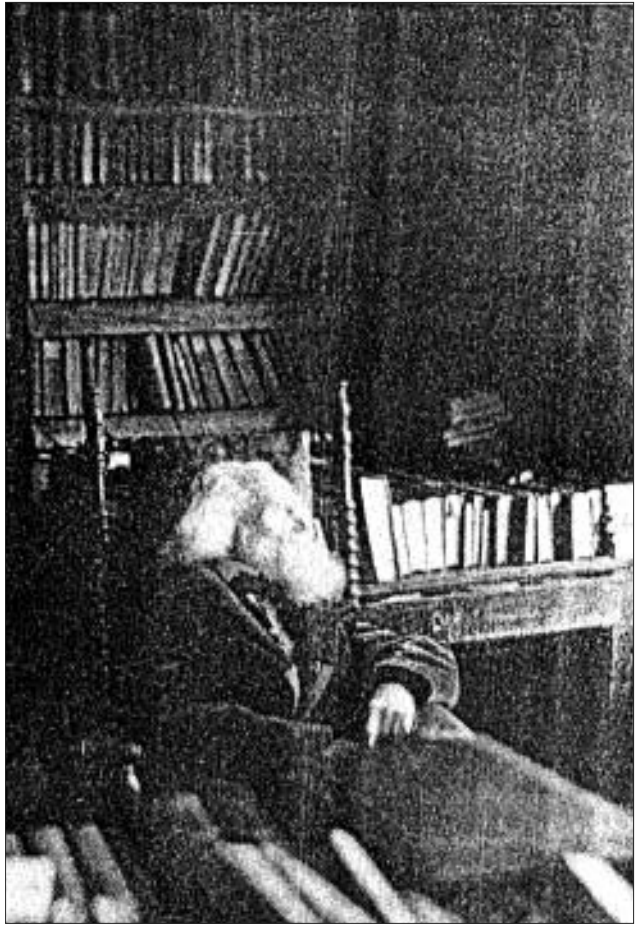
sometimes even overwhelmed, the pages they belonged to. But even university press editors have brought out their pruning shears and begun to cut. Well-educated baby boomers, so it seems, cry out for elegantly written and printed essays to read amid the bubbling cappuccino machines and smooth paneling of Borders and Barnes & Noble superstores. But trade publishers take little interest in such titles, since they usually sell only a few thousand copies. Subsidized learned presses have rushed in where free-market angels feared to tread. Discouraging or refusing the monographs that once filled their lists, editors are hunting for experienced scholarly authors willing and able to write for a larger public—and to do so without citing tons of primary and secondary sources. Pedantry is out, essays are in. Perhaps the distinguished historian Gertrude Himmelfarb was prescient when she asked, in an essay published a few years ago, “Where have all the footnotes gone?” The footnote—or so the *New York Times* article indicated—has become an endangered species, abandoned by its own progenitors and stripped of its fragile niche in the ecology of publishing.

This dramatic story provoked widespread discussion. The *Guardian*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and many other publications weighed in with essays, most of them deploring the footnote's supposed decline and fall, many of them deploying heavy-footed humor at the expense of that ever-attractive subject, the folly of scholars. Footnotes, after all, have served as the butt of countless jokes. Noel Coward notoriously remarked that turning from a main text to a footnote is very much like ceasing to make love in order to go downstairs and answer the door. Yet once a brush with extinction loomed, this unloved literary device found more articulate defenders than did the blue whale or the whooping crane.

As usual, however, the blare of the Anglo-American publicity machine did more to drown out than to further serious discussion of the subject on which it had seized.

Few of the columnists and reporters who followed up the original piece went into the situation as deeply as its author: none of them significantly revised his account. Yet he did not, and naturally could not, treat the issues exhaustively. In fact, the footnote is hardly endangered, and this is only one of the many features of its past history, present state, and future prospects that are widely misunderstood.

A closer look at scholarly publishing in the 1990s reveals a scene far more varied—and in part more traditional—than the Footnote Furor of '96 suggested. It's true that many trade publishing houses find the books that once made up the middle of their lists unappealing, while university presses welcome them. Sales of 3,000 to 5,000 copies will not carry the costs of a trade title—but they will fill university press managements



Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) is considered the father of modern, documented historiography.

with glee, and their coffers with a modest amount of gold. Many university press directors and editors like to stress these facts, which give their calling and their products a new glamor. Fairly enough, they emphasize that the books that now head their lists might have graced a trade list 10 years ago and are aimed at a wide, if not an enormous, readership. Certainly, such books are the likeliest university press products to find a place among the Starbucks mugs and T-shirts at a shopping mall bookstore.

But no alert consumer of university press books would suggest that essays written for a general public dominate their lists. For the most part, university presses still publish learned books. Editors still commission scholars to write reports assessing the manuscripts submitted to them; they still try to help authors attain more accuracy in content as well as more

polish in style; in short, they still try to publish books that offer the reading world new knowledge. And even though most editors insist that they do not wish to help universities make decisions about the promotion of junior scholars, their default product remains the first book of a recent Ph.D. recipient out to shed the chrysalis of assistant professorship for the wings of tenure. A press's willingness to offer a firm contract for publication may well determine the outcome of a young scholar's career. The books that win such approval almost always retain the scars of their origins, in the form of extensive documentation. Without this, after all, authors unknown to anyone but the directors of their dissertations can hardly expect to be taken seriously.

As to the senior scholars who professed their distaste for footnotes, they belong to a special, long-established category—that of the GOSH, or Grand Old Scholar and Historian. Daniel Boorstin and Gordon Craig, both of whom the *New York Times* quoted, sailed into port decades ago, on books that carried substantial cargoes of erudition in their holds. They have demonstrated their command of vast numbers of primary and secondary sources over and over again since then. Editors, reviewers, and readers don't need footnotes to assure them of such scholars' competence and probity—any more than they did when Princeton University Press published R. R. Palmer's magnificent, footnoteless *Twelve Who Ruled* (1941), which received universal acclaim and found tens of thousands of buyers, more than 50 years ago. The liberties that university presses allow such authors are hardly new, any more than is the search for readable books by reputable scholars. For all the changes in the retail book market, in other words, and despite the financial incentives and problems to which university presses must respond, source references are hardly in

danger. Nor are the kinds of books for which they have traditionally been written. A little historical perspective instills calm.

Today, as in the past, a look at the characteristic products of most university presses will cure insomnia. Jargon still clots the language, learning still knots and gnarls the sentences, and footnotes or endnotes still supply a quarter to a third of the content of most university press books. Most of them are more likely to bring a glaze like that of fine Sung porcelain to the eye of the general reader than they are to kindle controversy—or to ring up sales. Most of them, in fact, will find buyers in the mid three figures, and many will lose money for their publishers. And that is as it should be. University presses, like other complex organizations, have many purposes. But they receive tax exemptions because they vigorously promote the distribution of new and financially unremunerative forms of knowledge. I myself have cheerfully lost large sums of money for distinguished academic publishers in this country and abroad. But I have never had the slightest difficulty finding a university press to take on my large and unsaleable books. (One editor in England did murmur, when I handed in a typescript of more than usual length and complexity, that I seemed to want to confirm the widespread view that Oxford is the home of lost causes.) As long as this is true, footnotes are not in danger.

In one respect, however, the *Times* story on footnotes was more than overdue. For if the footnote's safety seems assured for the foreseeable future, its nature and history have gone unexamined for far too long. Even the strongest defenders of the footnote have generally not reflected very hard or long on where this strange literary device comes from. And that seems very odd. Scientists' strategies for gathering, recording, and publishing their data have been intensively studied in recent decades. The social transactions that go into the creation of experi-

> ANTHONY GRAFTON is the Dodge Professor of History at Princeton University. He is the author of *Joseph Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship* (1983–1993), *Forgers and Critics: Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship* (1990), and *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450–1800* (1991). His study, *The Tragic Origins of the German Footnote*, will appear in 1997. Copyright © 1997 by Anthony Grafton.

ments and the rhetorical conventions that govern the publication of their results—so we now know—have a history of their own. No one interested in the origins and development of the sciences in the modern world can ignore it. The social and rhetorical histories of humanistic scholarship, by contrast, have barely begun to be examined. In his notebooks, Louis Pasteur recorded his procedures in unsparing detail, much of it not meant for public consumption. These have been analyzed in great depth and have provoked sharp debate. But the notebooks and drafts of Leopold von Ranke, the 19th-century Berlin professor who is usually considered the founder of modern, documented historiography, have attracted little attention—even though they too raise fascinating questions about the distance that separates Ranke’s “private science” from his publications.

Ranke, as everybody knows, transformed the writing of history from a literary genre to a scientific practice, relying on massive comparative study of archival documents to show “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*”—“how it really was.” He often typifies a better age than this one in nostalgic accounts of that bygone era when historians were men and footnotes were footnotes. In fact, however, a comparison of Ranke’s published histories with his working drafts and notes suffices to show that nostalgia for an age of real erudition is misplaced. Ranke transformed history, in theory, by insisting that every narrative about the past should be accompanied by a systematic analysis of the sources it rested on. But his practices were far less rigorous than his theoretical professions. Ranke worked as sloppily as any modern. Only after he had composed his texts did he add footnotes to them. Sometimes he could not find the original source or document from which he had drawn a fact or a conjecture—a problem which he dealt with not by altering his text but by the simpler expedient of omitting the footnote in question. For all his brilliance as a stylist and critic, in other words, Ranke, the father of modern historiography, was no master of the footnoter’s craft. This may help to explain why he was sav-

agely attacked, soon after his first book appeared, for the inaccuracies and oversights that disfigured its documentation. Ranke might have been the Altvater of the modern historical profession, but his footnotes—and the research procedures they recorded—hardly deserve to be cited as paragons for the old to lament or models for the young to imitate.

The story of the footnote in fact began long before Ranke, or the 19th century, dawned. Even in the ancient world, when most historians saw their genre as one that depended on oral reports from participants in the events they described, some found it necessary to cite official documents, such as treaties. Josephus, the historian of the Jews, and Eusebius, the historian of the early Christian church, produced elaborate compilations of earlier sources. They wanted to show irrefutably, by full quotation of the relevant materials, that the Jewish tradition was older and more profound than the Greek and that the best of pagan philosophy and theology looked forward to Christianity. Church history, in short, not only relied on, but largely consisted of, large gobbets from primary sources—as it still does, in devout Catholic and Protestant circles alike.

The Roman lawyers and Catholic theologians who produced the authoritative commentaries and reference books of late antiquity and the Middle Ages also devised systems of abbreviations and glosses to indicate the sources they relied on. Systematic documentation, in short, has existed for a long time. Practitioners of intellectual professions that rely on authoritative core texts have used it extensively for millennia; historians have done so almost as long, if less consistently. Evidently the footnote didn’t come into being, like the modern university, in early 19th-century Berlin. It belongs to the long-term history of scholarship and narrative.

The modern footnote—with its full bibliographical ideals, discussion of variant texts and sources, and separate place on the page—is only one species of this larger genus. It seems to have arrived at its definitive form in the later 17th century. In that age of systematic and shattering doubt, when all certainties about the Bible, God,



The scholar cloistered among his books has long been a popular target for satirists, as in this 15th-century German woodcut from Sebastian Brant's *Das Narenschiff* (Ship of Fools).

and nature seemed to dissolve, Descartes and a slew of lesser critics denied that historical knowledge was either certain or useful. Footnotes couldn't prove the utility of studying the past. But they could prove—or so many scholars thought—that a particular story about the past rested on all the best sources, that it had as much certainty as statements about human and historical affairs could attain. Pierre Bayle's great *Historical and Critical Dictionary* of 1697, which consisted in large part of footnotes (and even footnotes to footnotes), amounted to a massive, polemical demonstration that a limited measure of historical knowledge could be rescued from the criticism of the skeptics. His book had numerous rivals, scores of imitators, hundreds of readers. Within a few decades after it had appeared, scholars were producing footnotes by the bushel—and satirists were making fun of them for doing so. (One of them, Rabener, wrote an entire dissertation in footnotes, without a text; after all, he explained, nowadays erudite footnotes, not eloquent texts, made authors

famous.) The footnote as we know it, in other words, is the precipitate of philosophical discussions that almost all makers and readers of footnotes have forgotten.

As this awkward fact suggests, footnotes can't in fact perform all of the functions that most writers and readers think they can. They were never intended to do so. No historian can back up every statement of fact in a tightly constructed narrative with a footnote—the sheer accumulation of detail would be staggering. And no accumulation of footnotes can prove that a historian has really captured the truth. Footnotes indicate some of the ways in which their author has analyzed the sources and drawn inferences from them. But the next historian to work through the same archive will find different documents, or different passages from the same documents, more important—or will read the same passages in quite different ways. (Consider, for example, the way in which Daniel Goldhagen, reading archival documents about the German police battalions that slaughtered Jews during World War II, wove quite a different story from them than did Christopher Browning, who had based a pioneering book on the same texts a few years before.)

At best, footnotes can only document part of a story—and a subsidiary one at that. The historian's text offers a narrative about the past—a narrative that, as theorists love to remind us, follows literary conventions rather than obeying purely factual constraints. The historian's footnotes offer a narrative about the historian who wrote the text—one just as literary, just as conventional, and sometimes just as fantastic as the text above them. They tell a story of sources consulted, reading done, interpretations accepted or dismissed: they amount to a staccato, partial intellectual biography. But as a device never intended to do more than shore up one version of a contentious event or interpretation, they cannot possibly support an entire book, detail by detail.

Nonetheless, footnotes are vital to modern scholarship. They are vital, first of all, because they give us reason to believe that their

authors have done their best to find out the truth about past events and distant countries. In an impersonal world, where credentials give the only assurance that a particular doctor or dentist is “good enough” to remove our appendix or fix our teeth, solid, well-executed footnotes indicate that a particular historian is “good enough” to interpret the thought of the Founding Fathers or the development of sanitation. They give us reason to trust what we read—even when, as usual, we don’t check them.

Footnotes have a second, even more important role, as well. They give the concerned reader purchase, leverage, an Archimedean point from which to shift and crack the apparently marmoreal certainties of the text they supposedly support. Ancient historians wrote to give pragmatic and moral instruction, couched in the form of examples that would hit home more forcefully than general precepts. Their texts admitted questions about politics and morality. But they generally assumed that the core narrative was something set, assured, solid, not to be argued about. Modern scholars, by contrast, write to offer the best hypotheses they can, on the basis of

the sources they know, about what happened and why. Their reconstructions of the past offer the closest approximations possible to a truth that eludes final establishment as determinedly as Daphne eluded Apollo. Footnotes, though always radically incomplete, at least suggest the processes of research and thought that scholars have carried out. By doing so, they also suggest ways that the author’s own formulations can be unraveled. Devised to give texts authority, footnotes in fact undermine. They democratize scholarly writing; they bring many voices, including those of the sources, together on a single page. By doing so, they make the reading of many modern works of scholarship—for example, those of the great Weimar émigré scholars, such as Erwin Panofsky and Ernst Kantorowicz—a peculiar and wonderful experience. The reader hears, and even takes part in, a conversation, with the author and the author’s witnesses alike—a conversation more intense, more critical, and more suggestive than the reading of a bare text can ever be. Long may footnotes wave—or, if they refuse to do anything so undignified, long may they drown the reader in a happy variety of emotions, anecdotes, and opinions.