

ARTICLE

Last Words: Documenting the End of Lives

Cathy Moran Hajo¹

King Arthur: “What does it say?”

Brother Maynard: “It reads, ‘Here may be found the last words of Joseph of Arimathea. He who is valiant and pure of spirit may find the Holy Grail in the Castle of aaaaaaagh!’”

King Arthur: “What?”

Brother Maynard: “The Castle of aaaagggh.”

Sir Bedevere: “What is that?”

Brother Maynard: “He must have died while carving it.”

Sir Launcelot: “Oh, come on!”

Brother Maynard: “Well that’s what it says.”

King Arthur: “Look, if he were dying, he wouldn’t bother to carve ‘aaaaggghhh,’ he’d just say it!”

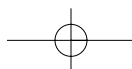
Brother Maynard: “Well, that’s what’s carved in the rock!”

Sir Galahad: “Perhaps he was dictating.”²

The above scene from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* can be contorted into an illustration of the dilemma faced by documentary editors when dealing with the death of the subject of their edition. We want to use documents

¹I would like to thank my colleagues, Esther Katz and Peter C. Engelman, for their comments on this article, and acknowledge their research done for the Sanger Papers that I have drawn from for parts of this article.

²*Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975).



to chronicle the lives of our subjects, but, as King Arthur rightly exclaimed, few record their dying moments in print. In most editions, the death of the subject also ends the editor's work, adding another layer of significance to the event. In this article, I will explore the different ways editors have recorded and contextualized these deaths and discuss how the Margaret Sanger Papers Project grappled with the issue of selection as we reached Sanger's death.

For a woman who lived such a long, turbulent, and vibrant life, Margaret Sanger died quietly. Congestive heart failure due to arteriosclerosis took her life on 8 September 1966 at a nursing home in Tucson, Arizona.³ She was almost eighty-seven years old and had been in declining health for the previous six years, spending four years in the nursing home. Momentous events in the birth control movement—from the F.D.A.'s approval of the oral contraceptive to the landmark *Griswold vs. Connecticut* Supreme Court decision—were announced without public comment from the woman who had led the birth control movement since she named it in 1914.

At the end of her life, Sanger was not only bed ridden, but suffered bouts of confusion and memory loss. As her close friend Dorothy Hamilton Brush wrote to Sanger's son Stuart,

My heart aches for her all the time. We can live too long. It seems so wicked that one who has overcome in her lifetime a thousand obstacles insuperable for any but a genius, should have to be submitted to the ignominy of a rudderless drifting towards death. Especially as it is the one thing she repeatedly said she would never permit to have happen to her. But as someone once said, when the time to act really comes, one is usually beyond the power to know it.⁴

Frail and disoriented one day, Sanger could rally the next, holding long conversations with family or friends, or even more improbably being interviewed by *CBS News* for a birth control documentary in March 1962.⁵ But she wrote very few letters during these years, and most of what survives are brief, typed business letters drafted by her secretary or written for her by

³State of Arizona Death Certificate, 8 September 1966. (*Margaret Sanger Microfilm Edition, Smith College Collections*, S83:901 (hereafter *MSMS*).

⁴Dorothy Brush to Stuart Sanger, 26 December 1963 (*Sanger Papers, Unfilmed Portion, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College*) (hereafter *MSP-U*).

⁵For Sanger's extremely brief appearance see *CBS News*, "Before *Griswold vs. Connecticut: Birth Control and the Law-1962*" (Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 2001; 55 minutes; Black & White; first aired on 10 May 1962.)

Dorothy Brush. In May 1962, a newly hired secretary described her:

Mrs. Sanger has been sleeping most of the time since I have been here. Once and a while she will have the energy to look at a few letters and react somewhat but I can't get her to do much dictating as yet. Maybe she will later on."⁶

She never did. The last letter authored by Sanger that we have found was penned for her by her friend Grace Sternberg in July of 1963, who noted she had written "exactly as M.S. dictated." The last letter with Sanger's signature was written only the week before—more than three years before her death.⁷

Most of the descriptions we have of Sanger's final years come from her friends and family. These offer two very different narratives. A group of friends felt that Sanger should have been allowed to remain at home and blamed her sons, particularly Stuart, a medical doctor who lived next door to his mother, for taking legal custody and placing her in a home. He, on the other hand, argued that his mother was incapable of taking care of herself and accused her "friends" of taking financial advantage of his ailing mother. Sanger herself remained mostly silent, though in 1963, Stuart Sanger claimed

She seems to take great delight in keeping things stirred up and in a turmoil. Her well-meaning, but rather uninformed friends go into battle upsetting all of us who are trying to do our best for her.⁸

Selecting documents for the *Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger* is a difficult enough task. We have more than one hundred thousand documents in the Sanger microfilm edition, which we have culled down to a four-volume book edition of about one thousand documents. For us, Sanger's death will occur in *Volume 3: The Politics of Planned Parenthood, 1939–1966*.⁹ Of the twenty-seven years covered in the volume, the last five needed special care and we could have handled them in any number of ways. Poorly documented as

⁶By the end of the month, the secretary reported that Sanger had forgotten all the instructions that she gave her the previous week, but that she was ready to respond if Sanger should return to lucidity. (Raquel Sellner to Dorothy Brush, 2 May and 21 May 1962 [MSM S59:686 and 773].)

⁷See Grace Sternberg to Leighton Rollins, 21 July 1963, Margaret Sanger to Leighton Rollins, 11 July 1963, and Sanger to Rollins, 11 July 1963 (MSM S59:770, 772, and 768.)

⁸Dorothy Brush to Margaret Grierson, 14 March 1963 [Brush Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College]; Margaret Sanger to Leighton Rollins, 21 July 1963 and Stuart Sanger to Dorothy Brush, 8 Feb. 1962 (MSM S59:770 and 760).

⁹Our fourth volume, *Round the World For Birth Control, 1922–1966* deals exclusively with Sanger's efforts to globalize birth control. We will revisit her death in that volume, focusing on the international impact and reaction.

they are, it is no surprise that Sanger's decline and death are not well covered in secondary material.¹⁰ Unlike her childhood and youth, the other major undocumented period of her life, we do not have her memoirs or recollections to draw from. We will never have a good sense of what Sanger was feeling, how aware she was, and what she may have thought about developments in the birth control movement or even the debates between her family and friends. Instead, we are left with scattered letters written by her friends, sons, and secretaries, describing her declining health and the care she received. We also have some oral interviews with family and friends about her final years. These third-party documents would normally be excluded from our volumes, as we limit selection to Sanger-authored documents and only the most valuable incoming letters.¹¹ If we adhered strictly to our selection policies, we would have to document her death with editorial text, either noting her death in the introduction to the final chapter of the volume, in an editorial note following the last document, or in annotation. The last document in the edition would most likely have been an incoming letter by Walter Groth, written on 26 July 1965, though we might have selected Sanger's last outgoing letter, to Leighton Rollins in July 1963. The Groth letter is an interesting hearkening back to her activism in the 1910s, and the Rollins letter discusses the condition of her health in 1963, but neither provide us with any insight into her final years. Ending our volume with one of these rang false to one of the goals of our volumes, which is to create a documentary edition that can be read as a narrative biography.

Looking at what other editors have done at the ends of their editions has proven useful to us. Solutions ranged from using editorial notations in introductions, head notes, endnotes and footnotes, to inserting third-party letters and documents created after the death of the subject. Most editors of personal papers will one day grapple with the deaths of their subject, and

¹⁰Sanger's two autobiographies, *My Fight for Birth Control* (1931) and *Autobiography* (1938) and Lawrence Lader's *The Margaret Sanger Story* (1955) predate her death. David Kennedy's *Birth Control Pioneer* (1970) carries her story only to 1937. Birth control histories that include detailed analysis of Sanger, like James Reed's *Birth Control and American Society* (1978), Linda Gordon's *Moral Right of Women* (2003) and Carole McCann's *Birth Control Politics From 1916-1945* (1994) all focus on Sanger's professional life. Biographies by Ellen Chesler (*Woman of Valor*, 1993) and Madeline Gray (*Margaret Sanger*, 1979) contain brief coverage of her last years.

¹¹Incoming letters in *Volumes I* and *II* usually fit one of two categories: response documents that reveal some of Sanger's thoughts when her letters were not found (such as her first husband's side of their divorce in the 1910s), and letters that Sanger responds to which are too complex to summarize in head and end notes.

exploring the issue before the time comes can lead to a more reasoned decision that takes into account the nature of the edition.

The Editor Breaks the News

Using editorial notes to report the death is an understated approach; one which hews strictly to the selection policies of many projects. Editions that include only outgoing letters cannot, by definition, include coverage of the subject's death, unless, like Joseph of Arimathea, he used a dictation service. Even projects that include both incoming and outgoing correspondence face the same dilemma. Once a person dies, does the editor continue to include incoming letters, which the subject never received? In the case of the *Andrew Johnson Papers*, the editors did, using a get-well letter to Johnson written the day he died to report Johnson's death in a footnote.¹²

Most editors provide information about the subject's death in introductory material for the final volume of the edition. When a chronology is included in the volume, it too includes details of the subject's death. Some editors employ this as the only mention of the death. Beverly Palmer used this stratagem in the *Selected Letters of Charles Sumner*, in which the volume simply ends with a 9 March 1874 letter written by Sumner. Thomas O'Brien Hanley's *The John Carroll Papers* demonstrates Carroll's awareness of his impending death by including his last will and testament, and his request for prayers as he might "shortly appear before my God and my judge," but no specific reference to his death is made in annotation or in the documents. Few are as eloquent in these statements as Robert A. Rutland, editor of the *Papers of George Mason*, who described Mason's death in the foreword to the volume, "And then, on an autumn Sunday afternoon in 1792, all of George Mason's anxieties disappeared forever."¹³ In volumes like this, the final document is given no special treatment or annotation to indicate that death followed, save the start of appendices, the bibliography, or index.

Another approach is to add an endnote or footnote to the last document

¹²The footnote reported that early that morning Johnson had suffered a series of strokes and died at his daughter's home. A photograph of the Greeneville, Tenn. courthouse where Johnson lay in state followed. The editors closed the volume with Ulysses S. Grant's presidential order announcing Johnson's death. (Paul Bergeron, ed. *The Papers of Andrew Johnson, Vol. 16, May 1864–July 1875* [Knoxville, 2000], pp. 762–64.)

¹³Beverly Wilson Palmer, ed. *The Selected Writings of Charles Sumner* (Boston, 1990), p. xix and 631; Thomas O'Brien Hanley, ed. *The John Carroll Papers* (London, 1976), p. xiii, 369–73; and Robert A. Rutland, ed. *The Papers of George Mason, 1725–1792, Vol. III, 1787–1792* (Chapel Hill, 1970), pp. cxxv–cxxvi, xxxiii.

in the volume providing the details of the subject's death. Given the amount of space and time devoted to the subject, this can come off as markedly laconic. Salmon Chase's 7 May 1873 death is reported in footnote four of a letter he wrote to his daughter Janet Chase Hoyt on 12 April, discussing his plans to come visit her and her new baby. The note reads:

Chase went to New York on May 3 and stayed at Nettie's house on West Thirteenth Street, where he died on May 7.

But this is not the last document in the volume. Two letters written by Chase on 13 April and 5 May follow.¹⁴ The editors of the *Louis Brandeis Papers* end their volume with a brief letter he wrote to Robert Szold, noting in a footnote that shortly after the meeting discussed in the letter, Brandeis' health declined, he suffered a heart attack and died fifteen days later. The note also offers a detailed description of Brandeis's memorial, including quotes by Dean Acheson and Felix Frankfurter, and a report on the burial.¹⁵ Gary Moulton ended his volume of Chief John Ross's *Papers* with his last will and testament, written on 11 July 1866, three weeks before his death. He uses a footnote with information about actions that were taken on the will after Ross's death to give the date and circumstances of the death.¹⁶

Editors Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence introduced their final selection of Jessie Benton Frémont's letters with a seven-page essay that covered the years 1888–1902. The essay detailed the death of Frémont's husband and her relocation to California to begin work on her memoirs. It reports an accidental fall in 1900 which confined Frémont to a wheelchair. The last letter in the volume, written in June 1902, closes, "written with much pain," and the editors note that for the last six months of her life Frémont lapsed "into silence, evidently writing no more letters," and died quietly on 27 December 1902.¹⁷

Some editors employ the device of an unnumbered editorial note to describe the death, which can offer dramatic impact when the event was sudden or unexpected. In *The Family Letters of Victor and Meta Berger*, Michael Stevens included the last letter Victor Berger wrote his wife and noted that a

¹⁴John Niven, ed. *The Salmon Chase Papers, Vol. 5: Correspondence 1865–1873* (Kent State University Press, Kent, 1998), pp. 368–70.

¹⁵Melvin I. Urofsky and David W. Levy, ed. *Letters of Louis Brandeis, Vol. V, 1921–1941: Elder Statesman* (New York, 1978), p. 655.

¹⁶Gary Moulton, ed. *The Papers of Chief John Ross, Vol. II, 1840–1866* (Norman, Okla., 1985), pp. 680–82.

¹⁷Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, ed. *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont* (Chicago, 1993), pp. 519–25, 557.

month later:

Berger was injured in a streetcar accident in Milwaukee on July 16, 1929, and died the following August 7. Berger's body lay in state in Milwaukee's City Hall, and more than 100,000 people came to pay their respects.¹⁸

In her edition of Frances Willard's diaries, Carolyn De Swarte Gifford employs the same method to describe the final two years of Frances Willard's life. No diary for the years 1897–98 has been found, so following the final entry for 1896, Gifford inserts a three-paragraph summary of Willard's activities until her death in February 1898, including her travels, activities, illness, and her wishes about her replacement at the Women's Christian Temperance Union.¹⁹ Patricia Holland and Milton Meltzer conclude *Lydia Marie Child: Selected Letters 1817–1880* with a letter to Sarah Shaw that ends, in part,

There are stormy times ahead. But perhaps you and I will slip away before they come.

A final end note indicates that Child died six weeks later and briefly describes the services and her burial.²⁰

Mary Jo Kline chose the device of an "Epilogue" when she completed her work on Aaron Burr. Two pages summarize the last twenty-eight years of Burr's life, detailing medical setbacks, changes that Burr made to his will, his death, and the tributes to him that followed. The volume ends with the text of Burr's gravestone.²¹ Roger N. Parks used a similar tactic to end the *Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, where the epilogue describes Greene's illness and his final six days. More extensive than the Burr example, Parks includes treatment of the questions raised about Greene's exact cause of death, his burial, and the subsequent mystery of the location of his tomb, including tributes, eulogies, and notes on the fates of Greene's wife and children.²²

This device seems to work best when there is some controversy follow-

¹⁸Michael E. Stevens, ed. *The Family Letters of Victor and Meta Berger, 1894–1929* (Madison, 1995), p. 415.

¹⁹Gifford, ed. *Writing out my heart :selections from the journal of Frances E. Willard, 1855–96* (Urbana, 1995) pp. 426–27.

²⁰Milton Meltzer and Patricia G. Holland, ed., *Lydia Marie Child: Selected Letters* (Amherst, 1982).

²¹Kline, ed. *The Political Correspondence and Public Papers of Aaron Burr, Vol. II* (Princeton, 1983), pp.1227–28.

²²Roger N. Parks, ed. *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene* (Chapel Hill, 2005), pp. 697–705.

ing the death. In *The Letters of William Cullen Bryant*, a three-page narrative describes Bryant's death, which occurred after he spoke at the dedication of a statue of Mazzini in New York's Central Park. Bryant was pressed by James Grant Wilson to accompany him to his house, but on his way up the stairs, the eighty-three year old poet stumbled and struck his head. Wilson delayed in taking Bryant home, and several days later the poet suffered a brain hemorrhage, worsened, and died. Bryant's friends blamed Wilson for his death, arguing that he ought not to have pressed a feeble Bryant to visit his home; some even accused Wilson of jostling Bryant, resulting in the accident. They also criticized his delayed decision to seek help. While the editors also include coverage and quotes of eulogies and funeral services dedicated to Bryant, no documents are used after Bryant's death. The last letter in the volume was written by Bryant the day before his accident.²³

Using Documents to Break the News

Another tactic is to loosen selection rules slightly at the end of the edition to use third-party material, including letters discussing the final illness, posthumous descriptions of the death, funerals and memorials, and other materials that tell more about the impact of the subject's life and death. Few of us are as fortunate as the editors of the *Papers of Henry Clay*, who had the relative luxury of a series of letters written in Clay's last three months detailing his final illness.

I am so feeble that the labor of writing soon exhausts me, and in regard to the state of my health, I have nothing encouraging to communicate,

he wrote to his wife, Lucretia Hart Clay from Washington on 22 March 1852. On 2 April, he wrote her again, reporting some improvement after a week of serious illness. On 21 April, he wrote his son Thomas Hart Clay, wishing that he could return home at the end of May, but fearing that his health would not permit the journey. On 25 April, he wrote again to his wife, reporting a "constant decline in strength, and all the essential functions of nature." Clay further wrote:

I write to nobody in my hand writing now but to you. How long I shall be able to do this is uncertain.

On 28 April, telegrams were sent asking Thomas Hart Clay to come to

²³William Cullen Bryant II and Thomas G. Voss, ed. *The Letters of William Cullen Bryant, Vol. VI (1872-1878)* (New York: Forham University Press, 1992), pp. 416-19, 458.

Washington, and Clay wrote James Brown Clay,

My health continues precarious & extremely critical. Unless there is a favorable change soon, I cannot hold out much longer.

Between 30 April and late June, Clay disposed of business matters and organized his estate. His actual death on 29 June is reported by an executive order of President Millard Fillmore, calling the death “long anticipated,” yet painful to all nonetheless. The editors also included a resolution of the U.S. Senate in summary form. A description of Clay’s funeral service on 10 July 1852 ends the volume.²⁴

Lacking such detailed first-person descriptions in either diaries or letters, many editions turn to other sorts of documents. *The Papers of Henry Laurens* used a brief notice in the 11 December 1792 *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*.

DIED. On Saturday last, at Mepkin, the honorable Henry Laurens, Esq. formerly President of Congress.

In a footnote, the editors provide the exact date of Laurens’ death (8 December). For a more descriptive account of Laurens’ last moments, editors David Chesnutt and C. James Taylor included a letter written by his daughter, Martha Laurens Ramsay to her husband, not only providing details, but testifying about the impact of his death on her. Finally, Henry Laurens’s will, made out a month before his death, is included as an appendix to the volume.²⁵

In the *Papers of Daniel Webster*, Webster’s letters to President Millard Fillmore set up his final illness. On 15 October 1852, Webster notes that he had been in “grave danger.” Third-party letters are used to record Webster’s worsening condition, including instructions for his gravestone. On 17 October, he rallied, writing to Fillmore that he felt “uncommonly well & strong.” The next day he reported feeling “easy, & strong, & as if I could go into the Senate and make a speech!” But a peek at the thinness of the remaining pages in the volume clues the reader to the grim truth. By 21 October,

²⁴Melba Hay Porter, ed. and Carole Reardon, assoc. ed., *The Papers of Henry Clay, Vol. 10: Candidate, Compromiser, Elder Statesman, January 1, 1844–June 29, 1852* (Lexington, 1991), pp. 961–69.

²⁵David R. Chesnutt and C. James Taylor, ed. *The Papers of Henry Laurens, Vol. 16* (Columbia, S.C., 2003), pp. 791–801.

Webster is again failing; a third-party letter describes the signing of his will. The editors include the will, and third-party letters to President Fillmore reporting Webster's increasingly dire condition. Once again, the president is asked to deliver the news, as the editors use Fillmore's 25 October letter to the Cabinet announcing Webster's death the day before. The editors conclude the volume with an autopsy report and a listing of Webster's property at the time of his death.²⁶

In *The Papers of William Livingston*, Carl E. Prince relies on third-party letters between Livingston's friends and family to recount his final illness. He reports Livingston's death with a published death notice and includes letters between his children which document the disposal of Livingston's household and properties. Livingston's will is included in the volume. The final letter in the volume was written ten years after Livingston's death by his son William Livingston, Jr. Writing to William Paterson, Livingston announces his quest to gather and publish his father's papers, an admirable coda to the modern edition that completed the son's work almost two hundred years later.²⁷

Controversy regarding the circumstances of death often encourages the editor to expand the treatment of the event to provide richer context. No edition demonstrates this better than *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, in which the fatal duel that claimed his life is documented in minute detail. An introductory note precedes the first letter from Aaron Burr, giving a historical context for dueling, a summary of Hamilton's participation in previous duels, and a summary of his increasingly acrimonious relationship with Burr. The editors acknowledge the many questions about the duel that they cannot answer, noting

Those interested in such questions must for the most part look elsewhere for answers for this volume presents only the written record of the events preceding, during, and following what the Reverend Eliphalet Nott called: 'MURDER, deliberate, aggravated MURDER.'²⁸

Editor Harold Syrett included a number of documents between Hamilton and Burr on the grievance, as well as the letters of their representatives, William P. Van Ness (for Burr) and Nathaniel Pendleton (for Hamilton).

²⁶Michael J. Birkner and Charles H. Wiltse, eds. *The Papers of Daniel Webster: Correspondence, Vol. 7: 1852-1852* (Hanover, N.H., 1986), pp. 360-73.

²⁷Carl E. Prince, May Lou Lustig, and David William Voorhees, *The Papers of William Livingston, Vol. 5, April 1873-August 1790* (Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1988), pp. 436-448.

²⁸Harold C. Syrett, ed. *Papers of Alexander Hamilton, Vol. 26* (New York, 1978), p. 241.

They also used sections of a later narrative of the events written by Van Ness and Pendleton, interspersing their remembrances of each day with the actual documents, providing a gripping buildup to the fateful meeting. Hamilton, preoccupied with setting his financial affairs in order in the days before the duel, wrote several letters to be opened only upon his death. The duel itself was described by Van Ness and Pendleton's later recollections, as were Hamilton's lingering death the next day. Documents range from the bill for Hamilton's coffin, to the coroner's report, and newspaper coverage. Because of the controversy surrounding his death, the Hamilton volume includes the correspondence between Pendleton and Van Ness as they attempted to issue a joint description of the events, though their partisan recollections do not agree. Among the final documents is news coverage of Hamilton's funeral and the indictments laid against Burr in both New York and New Jersey, for Hamilton's murder.²⁹ Throughout the section, the Hamilton editors provided detailed annotation leading the readers to other primary and secondary materials with more information.

The death of Booker T. Washington is similarly chronicled through third-party letters and documents. Washington's last letter is a brief missive about attending to his property on 10 November 1915. This is followed by an article in the *New York Tribune* reporting Washington's nervous breakdown. Washington was examined by doctors who found him "ageing rapidly," and blamed "racial characteristics" in part for his breakdown. They argued that

He is prone to worry under the strain of work, and while there is nothing to indicate that he is mentally unbalanced he is in no shape to go back to Tuskegee.

Letters between Washington's friends and relatives discussed his rapidly declining condition. They decide to transport him from New York City to Alabama. A flurry of telegrams from Emmet Jay Scott, announce Washington's death four hours after his arrival in Tuskegee. The editors include a number of condolence letters and telegrams, ranging from ordinary letter carriers to President Theodore Roosevelt. A lengthy obituary in the *Montgomery Advertiser* was included, as well as an elegy offered at his funeral by Capp Jefferson.³⁰

In the *Eugene V. Debs Papers*, incoming letters wish Debs well while he is

²⁹Syrett, *Hamilton*, pp. 322–48.

³⁰Louis R. Harlan and Raymond W. Smock, eds. *The Booker T. Washington Papers, Vol. 13, 1914–15* (Chicago, 1984), pp. 428–449.

in the hospital. His death is announced by a condolence letter written by a Standard Oil worker, Earl V. Hankins and his wife, to Debs's brother Theodore. The details of Debs's death on 20 October 1926 and his funeral are found in footnotes 2 and 3. The editors end the volume with fifteen more letters of condolence, written to either Theodore Debs or to Eugene's widow Katherine, as well as one incoming letter written the day that Debs died.

Throughout the volume letters written to and from Theodore Debs, who served as Eugene Debs's secretary, were included because they were written on Debs's behalf, as were occasional letters written by Katherine Debs in order to illuminate Debs's family life. Thus their inclusion at the end seems in keeping with the rest of the volume.³¹

The editor of the *Correspondence of H.G. Wells*, David C. Smith, used a unique letter to end his volume. It was written by Margaret Sanger to Wells on 14 August 1946, after she heard of his death. The letter begins "So, Darling HG you have gone out to the Great Beyond—" and contains Sanger's musings on Wells's death, reminisces about their relationship and her plans to visit London in the next week and visit his family. "It will be too awful not to see you there. My love wherever you are." This letter, found in Sanger's papers, was obviously never seen by Wells.³²

The Editor's Challenge

The question of how to handle the death of the subject raises broader questions about how the edition is conceived and what its underlying purpose is. In her "Historical Introduction," to the Burr papers, Mary Jo Kline states "This is an edition of documents, not a documented biography."³³ Other editors might argue that one cannot understand the letters without access to biographical details. It is a question of emphasis. Does one stress the *Papers of Margaret Sanger*, or the *Papers of Margaret Sanger*? Are the documents that remain truly the focus of our work, or are they just the best means to illuminate the subject who created them? When critical life events are not documented, does the editor skip over them, detail them in introductions, headnotes or endnotes, or do they include third-party or secondary source material to fill the gaps? How far should editors go to present a complete life,

³¹Robert J. Constantine, ed. *The Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, (Chicago, 1990), Vol. 1, p. xxxii, Vol. 3, pp. 601–612.

³²David C. Smith, *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells, Vol. 4, 1935–1946* (London, 1998), p. 536.

³³Mary Jo Kline, *The Political Correspondence and Public Papers of Aaron Burr, Vol. 1* (Princeton, 1983), p. lxix.

especially when documentation is poor or nonexistent?

Selection policies are created with the entire volume in mind. Determining that you will include only letters written by the subject of the edition, or that you will include every letter, whether in full transcription or in summary, defines the parameters of the edition. Momentous occasions in the life of the subject are usually, though not always, documented in some way and thus easy to include in our volumes. Sometimes editors have to bend or stretch their rules or use editorial text to insert an event for which the documents are weak or missing. In our first volume, one such incident was Sanger's 1916 arrest for opening the first birth control clinic in the United States. We had set up the clinic using newspaper interviews and letters, but the only document of the police raid was a blotter entry and a list of confiscated objects. We chose to use the opening of the Brownsville clinic as a chapter break, allowing us to provide more detailed background to the issue in the introduction to the chapter. We used a headnote to give the particulars of Sanger's arrest and upcoming trial and then followed with letters she wrote after it had occurred.³⁴

Childhood presents a similar challenge. Most editors deal with the early years of their subject's life in essay form, detailing the influences on their lives and educations in a few pages, bringing the reader up to speed so that they are prepared to begin reading the writings of the subject as an adult. They are helped in this task by autobiographies, later recollections, and other documents used to construct a narrative of childhood and early adulthood. Even when documents exist for the subject's childhood, they are usually not terribly illuminating about the subject's development—they might be classroom copybooks or short letters to family members about mundane topics. Few editors choose the same route when reaching the end of the subject's life. For many, there is no need to even consider it, as their subject is still able to communicate his or her ideas, and is producing meaningful documents. When the subject was unable to do so, editors seem to prefer to include third-party discussions of the death rather than cover it in an editorial note. Perhaps it is an emotional attachment to the subject that the editor is loathe to break. Instead of simply noting that the author sickened and died, we are instead encouraged to attend the death vigil with family members, loyal co-workers and colleagues, through reports of the subject's worsening condition

³⁴Esther Katz, ed. *The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger: Vol. 1: The Woman Rebel, 1900–1928* (Urbana, 2003), pp. 197–202.

and preparations for his or her final journey.

Death also offers the editor the opportunity to reflect upon the life of the subject, offering summaries of accomplishments written at the time. While most volumes include a general introduction that contains a historical interpretation of subject's impact on society, eulogies, obituaries and sympathy letters offer assessments of the immediate impact, both historical and emotional. For readers, these types of documents, which are not necessarily included in the selection policy of editions, may create a more satisfying ending than would the abruptness of a final document and a terse note indicating that no more volumes will follow. In the case of prominent figures, editors have many documents to choose from. Selecting a handful to serve as a coda for the volume needs the same care and attention as the selecting documents for the main body of the edition. When the subject of the volume is less well-known, the reactions of wives, children, and grandchildren may be all that the editor has to choose from.

When faced with choosing documents as varied as wills, eulogies, obituaries, tributes, descriptions of funeral services, and letters about the impact of the death upon the family, editors are best advised to analyze the content of the previous documents in order to decide how to end the volume. Editions that focus on the subject's management of property and businesses often include the will and other materials relating to the estate; those of politicians tend to feature expressions of grief made in Congress or by other prominent political figures. When family relationships are a critical focus of the edition, the editor is more likely to provide letters written by family members after the death, describing it, and its effect on them. The obituary and descriptions of funerals, memorials, and other commemorative services testify to the importance of the subject to his or her society, how their life was understood by those who shared the age, and what aspects of it were most highly prized. They also enable the editor to indicate that perhaps the subject's fame had begun to fade. While the obituaries of Sanger were fulsome and widespread, some may have been surprised that she was still been alive in 1966. In fact, six years before her death, the new head of the Margaret Sanger Research Bureau, Dr. Alan Guttmacher referred to her as the "late" Margaret Sanger. Still with her wits about her at that time, Sanger slammed Guttmacher for his "unforgivable error," demanding his resignation.³⁵

³⁵Guttmacher did not resign, but abjectly apologized, noting "I do not know how I can make amends for this editorial error except to say that I and a host of other friends are supremely happy at the exaggeration of your death." (Sanger to Alan F. Guttmacher, 22 February 1960 and Guttmacher to Sanger, 10 February 1960 [MSM S56:715 and 646]; For obituaries see *New York Times*, 11 September 1966 and *Tucson Evening Star*, 9 September 1966.)

Factors that might make an editor choose one route over another are the richness of the third-party material; the suddenness of the death; and whether the death was controversial in any way. Some editors who chose to report deaths only in the general introduction to the volume may not have had any notable documents from which to choose. Readers of the *Abraham Lincoln Papers* will likely expect more details on his assassination than would those reading of Margaret Sanger's death from old age. There is simply more to say about an assassination. The editors can draw from recollections from a wide variety of people who experienced such an event in different ways. As with most questions of selection, it comes down to the goals of the edition. But by looking at what other editors have done, we can all more easily determine how best to handle this issue when we face it.

Margaret Sanger's Death

So, back to Sanger. In her case, we do not have her introspective letters about a final illness and we do not have letters describing her death. She passed away quietly, years after she wrote her last letter. Because ours is a selective volume, containing less than one percent of the materials in her archive, we are already accustomed to using editorial intervention in the form of chapter openings, headnotes, and endnotes to provide closure for issues that are mentioned but not completed within the selected documents. We decided to go with an obituary to mark the death, using a brief editorial head note to give the particulars of Sanger's life between 1963 and September 1966. We followed that with several tributes to Sanger that help to evaluate her impact, and finally included an undated letter written by Sanger, in which she intoned in part:

There is so much comfort in life in finding one's inner convictions expressed by one or many of our great philosophers. One of the dearest & most treasured which has stood me well through out the years where doubt of victory could be lurking in every closed hall or every official denouncement of the work I was doing—It was Victor Hugo's potent words that gave me faith & strength as I stated them again & again in meetings throughout the world. 'There is no Force in the World so great as that of an Idea whose hour has struck.'³⁶

In our current plans, Sanger gets the last word in the volume. Things may

³⁶Sanger to Clarence William Lieb, n.d. [MSM S60:799].



still change; we may find more letters written by Sanger at the end of her life as we work with her grandchildren and the descendants of her friends. We may end up dating the final letter, in which case we might move it forward in the volume. But our intent will remain the same—to report the end of Sanger’s life with as much detail and color as we have devoted to other periods in her life, and to do so using documents in conjunction with editorial bridges to convey information we cannot document.

