



The Footnote: A Curious History

By Anthony Grafton

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The weapon of pedants, the scourge of undergraduates, the *bête noire* of the “new” liberated scholar: the lowly footnote, long the refuge of the minor and the marginal, emerges in this book as a singular resource, with a surprising history that says volumes about the evolution of modern scholarship. In Anthony Grafton’s engrossing account, footnotes to history give way to footnotes *as* history, recounting in their subtle way the curious story of the progress of knowledge in written form. Grafton treats the development of the footnote—the one form of proof normally supplied by historians in support of their assertions—as writers on science have long treated the development of laboratory equipment, statistical arguments, and reports on experiments: as a complex story, rich in human interest, that sheds light on the status of history as art, as science, and as an institution. The book starts in the Berlin of the brilliant nineteenth-century historian Leopold von Ranke, who is often credited with inventing documented history in its modern form. Casting back to antiquity and forward to the twentieth century, Grafton’s investigation exposes Ranke’s position as a far more ambiguous one and offers us a rich vision of the true origins and gradual triumph of the footnote. Among the protagonists of this story are Athanasius Kircher, who built numerous documents into his spectacularly speculative treatises on ancient Egypt and China; Pierre Bayle, who made the footnote a powerful tool in philosophical and historical polemics; and Edward Gibbon, who transformed it into a high form of literary artistry. Proceeding with the spirit of an intellectual mystery and peppered with intriguing and revealing remarks by those who “made” this history, *The Footnote* brings what is so often relegated to afterthought and marginalia to its rightful place in the center of the literary life of the mind.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

The struggle over what history is and how it should be told affects even such a constant convention as the footnote. As Anthony Grafton tells us in his entertaining study *The Footnote*, this tool of scholarship is just that: a tool that marks the professional from the amateur. "Like the high whine of the dentist's drill," he says, "the low rumble of the footnote on the historian's page reassures: the tedium it inflicts, like the pain inflicted by the drill, is not random but directed, part of the cost that the benefits of modern science and technology exact." There are some scholars, Grafton avers, who consider the footnote an anachronism meant to distance people from their pasts. Conversely, there are some who wage whole wars against other scholars through the medium of their notes. In any event, Grafton opines, the footnote will prevail, protecting works of scholarship from assault as surely as armor protects a tank.

From Kirkus Reviews

A curious history, indeed. Few accoutrements of scholarship have been as denigrated as the lowly footnote, as this lively and fascinating narrative demonstrates. Scorned equally by scholar, student, and publisher, the footnote has lost its traditional place at the foot of the page and is now relegated to the "endnotes" following a chapter or at the end of a book. No%l Coward once remarked that having to read a footnote resembles having to go downstairs to answer the door while in the midst of making love. This longstanding animosity toward the footnote derives from a tradition that perceived of historical writing as a form of literature. Few scholars lavish the necessary attention on the notes and even fewer readers take notice. Only the insecure graduate student or fledgling scholar piles up note after note and by doing so claims a place in the guild of the profession. But a careful reading of footnotes is both revealing and rewarding, according to Grafton, a historian at Princeton University. The footnote, as he correctly and convincingly points out, is critical to the scientific nature of historical writing and therefore reflects both the ideology and technical practices of the craft. The footnote confers "proof" that the historian has visited the appropriate archives, dusted off the necessary documents, and consulted and exhausted the secondary literature. It is, in short, a badge of legitimacy. The reader familiar with Grafton's work will recognize the author's extraordinary range and familiarity with German, French, English, and Italian historical writing from the early modern period to the late 20th century. Grafton has, in fact, written a sly work of historiography, a kind of celebration of the gritty details of scholarly exploration, and not merely a chronicle of the despised footnote. Oh, yes; read his footnotes. (Happily, his publisher realized that endnotes would not do here.) -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Review

A witty and characteristically erudite book... Grafton's subject, apparently so trivial in itself and yet potentially so enlivening, offers cause for somewhat uneasy mirth. We may recall the toilers of *Gulliver's Travels*, who sought to make sunbeams from cucumbers. Not surprisingly, the pages of *The Footnote* are peppered with human folly. (David McKitterick *New York Times Book Review*)

[It's] hard to imagine a defense of the footnote by any historian with the least sense of style. Yet here it is: *The Footnote's* author, Anthony Grafton, is an anomaly in the American historical profession: a deeply learned scholar known for exacting work on the transformations of classical learning in early modern Europe and a sprightly writer capable of communicating his enthusiasm to anyone willing to listen. Mr. Grafton not only defends the footnote as a guarantee of the value of the historical currency. He also portrays it as a bulwark against tyranny. (Mark Lilla *Wall Street Journal*)

[An] excellent book... *The Footnote* is the study of an appealing, rather overlooked aspect of intellectual and cultural history. Yet it is also much more: an investigation into the historical imagination, a quick tour of 'the culture of erudition' and, not least, the most recent intellectual entertainment from one of the most learned and enjoyable scholars now at work. (Michael Dirda *Washington Post*)

Mr. Grafton has produced a delightful gem of a book that will appeal to many tastes. He displays an extraordinary level of erudition, is extremely readable, frequently witty and provides a guided tour across almost two thousand years in the development of Western scholarship. Needless to say, his own footnotes are a model of their kind. Above all, the author is neither boring nor pedantic. (Keith Windschuttle *Washington Times*)

We accept it as a given of scholarly writing that 'the text persuades, the notes prove.' But this form of narrative architecture was created at a particular time by particular men to fill particular needs. And this unlikely and lively book presents the story of its creation. Anthony Grafton tells when, where, and why historians adopted the two-tiered structure of writing. (Barbara Fisher *Boston Globe*)

The unwashed read the text, the learned check the footnotes. This, after all, is just what Grafton has taught us to expect. Grafton's footnotes, however, are short on polemic and long on accolades... They illustrate Grafton's generous spirit, and they call attention to the one use of footnotes that he conspicuously fails to discuss: praise instead of polemic. Grafton's own irenic practice is a model of decency. But if his footnotes are not so much fun as Gibbon's or Bayle's, his lively and searching text most assuredly is. For a pioneering discussion of these points, see A. Grafton. (G.W. Bowersock *New Republic*)

A curious history, indeed. Few accoutrements of scholarship have been as denigrated as the lowly footnote, as this lively and fascinating narrative demonstrates... The footnote, as [Grafton] correctly and convincingly points out, is critical to the scientific nature of historical writing and therefore reflects both the ideology and technical practices of the craft. The footnote confers 'proof' that the historian has visited the appropriate archives, dusted off the necessary documents, and consulted and exhausted the secondary literature. It is, in short, a badge of legitimacy. The reader familiar with Grafton's work will recognize the author's extraordinary range and familiarity with German, French, English, and Italian historical writing from the early modern period to the late 20th century. Grafton has, in fact, written a sly work of historiography, a kind of celebration of the gritty details of scholarly exploration, and not merely a chronicle of the despised footnote. (*Kirkus Reviews*)

A richly faceted story that interweaves the changes in the regard for and uses of the footnote with general developments in history writing... As Grafton traces his steps backward to the Renaissance with its admiration and imitation of ancient models, the world of the footnote emerges as one far more complex than expected... In the face of the seeming solidity of the text, the footnote serves as a reminder of the contingency of life as well as the precariousness of the text's construction. (Ernst A. Breisach *American Historical Review*)

A charming, intelligent volume that traces the footnote's development as a literary and historical device... *The Footnote* is an astonishing piece of scholarly writing, not least because it allows us to reconsider a subject that might charitably be called idiosyncratic, or even obscure. What makes the book work is Anthony Grafton's ability to write for a lay audience, to merge the ephemera of historical research with an accessible, nearly anecdotal, style. (David L. Ulin *Chicago Tribune*)

Anthony Grafton has written a fascinating book about this important, though often maligned, scholarly apparatus... Historians of all stripes will profit from reading Grafton's history of historical research and

writing (often called historiography) and especially from his detective work tracing history of the footnote, this vital academic detail which so many take for granted. (*Bulletin of the Historical Research in Music Education*)

Grafton argues convincingly that the history of the footnote is also the history of how scholars through the ages have evaluated, organized and presented information... *The Footnote* vividly evokes what it was like to conduct serious research in an era before Lexis-Nexis, *Who's Who* or even daily newspapers. (Adam Goodheart *Civilization*)

The Footnote tells how all those interesting tidbits migrated to the bottom of the page. (*Seattle Times/Post-Intelligencer*)

This is not a reference book to be consulted but an excursus to be savored, by a writer with a studied sense of style. (Cullen Murphy *Slate*)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

John Krumm:

Do you one among people who can't read pleasurable if the sentence chained within the straightway, hold on guys this particular aren't like that. This *The Footnote: A Curious History* book is readable by simply you who hate the perfect word style. You will find the information here are arrange for enjoyable studying experience without leaving possibly decrease the knowledge that want to deliver to you. The writer connected with *The Footnote: A Curious History* content conveys the idea easily to understand by many people. The printed and e-book are not different in the content but it just different by means of it. So , do you even now thinking *The Footnote: A Curious History* is not loveable to be your top record reading book?

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