

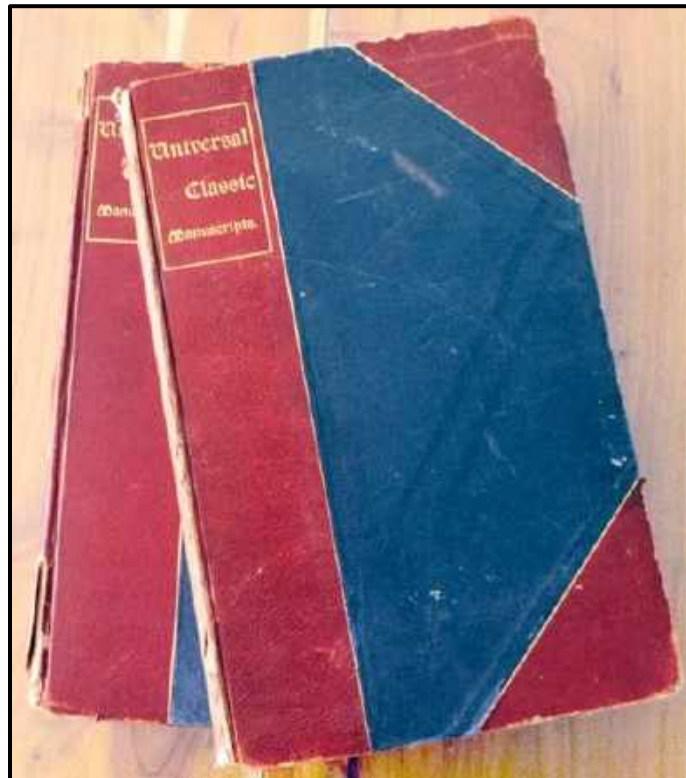
The Big Books: Using the Universal Classic Manuscripts

Michael Cranny¹

¹ Retired teacher, British Columbia, Canada

E-mail: mcranny@shaw.ca

I don't get to trot out my "big books" anymore now that I'm retired, but I do miss hauling out this unique, I think, resource. The "big books" are the Universal Classic Manuscripts, a collection of true facsimiles of autograph letters and other documents from the British Museum.¹⁴ Published around 1901 in two volumes, they're massive, almost half a meter long and a few kilos in weight. The Museum no doubt intended them to sit on some Edwardian scholar's oak reading table, not to be ported around in a packsack. I'd sometimes have two grade eight kids carry them into the room, like they are carrying a couch. It's theatrical and fun. Then I'll tell them how the "Manuscripts" were a gift from an elderly woman when I was fourteen. I'd also tell how I almost lost them when they fell out of my VW beetle in Glacier National Park, just after the back wheel dropped off. The Manuscripts like a good back-story.

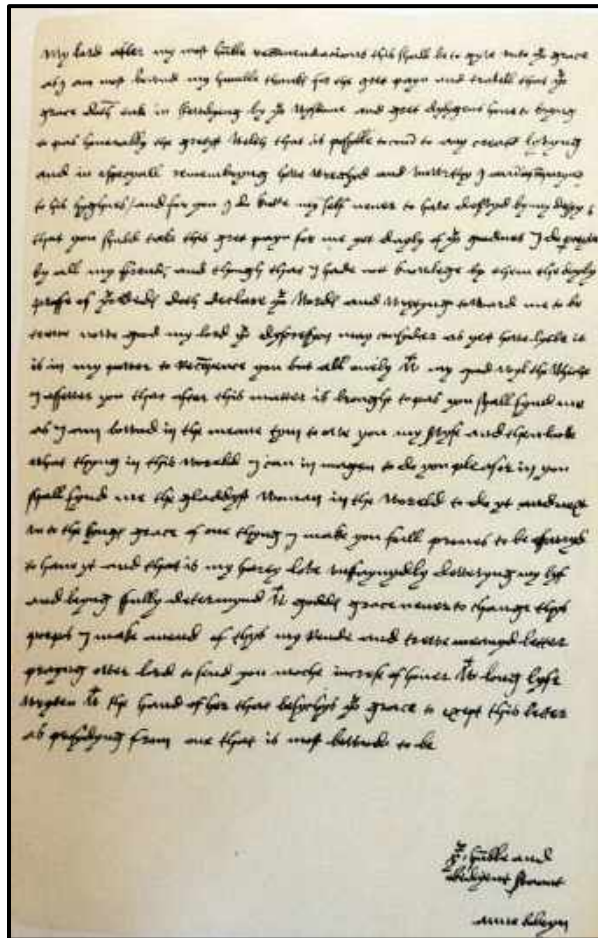


¹⁴ George F. Warner, ed. and trans. *Universal Classic Manuscripts: Facsimiles from originals in the Department of Manuscripts* (London: M. Walter Dunne, 1901).

The earliest document in the collection is from 1415 and the latest from 1885. I've used the Manuscripts with every high school grade but I have the most fun with them with Grade Eights and Grade Nines. As a teaching and learning tool, they're great. Like Russian nesting dolls, there's always something else inside. Kids enjoy reading the actual words of Anne Boleyn, Louis XIV, Elizabeth I and other famous figures written in their own hand. Happily, each document comes with an accompanying transcription otherwise none of us would get very far. Usually, I'd assign the same document to several groups and have them discover the historical and social context for it. A letter from, say, Anne Boleyn, becomes an intensely rich source when it provides the focus for a whole range of other activities, from play writing to portraiture. Sometimes I'd hold back the transcription, letting kids code-break their way through difficult handwriting and obscure spellings, bringing in the transcriptions before any serious frustration sets in. French, German, or Latin documents, such as a letter from Martin Luther, for example, need translations.

Reading originals also helps kids understand the kind of work an historian really does, and helps them get the process. Determining deeper context, intent, emotional factors, personal motivation, and all the other considerations that determine the worth and validity of a document involves digging, close reading, and research.

Classic Manuscripts is also, in effect, a kind of primary document that happens to include primary documents. As such it is also a window into class society at the turn of the last century, in Britain to be sure, but in Canada also. Students easily understand that only a few documents of the thousands possible have been selected and questions about the process inevitably result, particularly what (or who) was selected and why. In periods where large numbers of people were illiterate, we're not surprised to see nothing from the 'lower rungs of society', but I sometimes ask kids if a letter from, say a medieval midwife, would have made the cut anyway and if not, why not. Sometimes I'll ask students to create letters and other documents to fill in the gaps, or ask them to generate guidelines for a modern version of the Manuscripts. The "great man theory" looms large here.



We can go deeper too. With older students, and with more recent history, I'll circulate copies of the opening statement, which contains phrases such as, "events in which men and women of our race have had a part." Questions and discussions about the word "race" generally follow. This was, after all, the high-water mark of the British Empire, a big deal in Canada too. Having been in Liverpool, I find it hard not to throw social class into the mix. I carry a lot of baggage here so I have to be careful. Certainly, the publisher did not have "my people" in mind when he (it would certainly be a he) made his proposal to create the volumes. Few ordinary working people would have ever seen these books, unless they were delivering them to some grand house.

I'm careful about delving too deeply into historiography and historical understanding with younger kids because I want them to have fun with the documents, which they invariably do. With senior students, I expect to be more of a facilitator. It's a thrill when kids hijack a planned lesson and take the class into new and unexpected inquiries because important understandings usually result. So, thanks again for the books, Mrs. Williscroft. I don't know what I would have done without them.