ABSTRACT. Despite several attempts, the prolific writings of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz have not yet been brought together in a single edition. Efforts have been hampered by the sheer volume and diversity of the Leibniz estate, and also by changing political circumstances. This paper traces the history of the Leibniz edition as a long-term project of the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie and its predecessors.

INTRODUCTION: THE LEIBNIZ ESTATE

How many years must be spent on an edition before it is officially classified as a long-term project? Whatever the answer, half a century after Leibniz’s death, Denis Diderot, Member of the Berlin Academy, complained in his Encyclopédie that

There cannot be another man who has read and studied, thought and written more than Leibniz. Nonetheless, there is no complete edition of his works. It is quite scandalous that Germany, to whom this one man has brought more honour than Plato, Aristotle and Archimedes together to Greece, has not yet managed to assemble all which has stemmed from his pen. What he has written about the world, about God, about nature and the soul, is proof of the most sublime eloquence.¹

However, even if Diderot had read all the Leibniz papers and letters available in his lifetime, he would have seen no more than 15% of the complete estate – today, kept mainly in Hanover – the most exceptional literary estate anywhere in the academic world.² Leibniz once remarked, ‘Whoever knows me just from my published material, does not know me’.³ It is precisely the exceptional character that makes an edition of his writings and letters so difficult.

³ ‘Qui me non nisi editis novit, non novit.’ To Vincent Placcius, 21 February 1696, in L. Dutens (ed.), G.W. Leibniz, Opera omnia, 6 vols. (Geneva, 1768), VI.1.65.
Apparently, Leibniz never threw away his notes, but rather kept all his records, including those he wrote while travelling, as he hoped to compile all these into a *Scientia generalis*. Hardly any of this material was known to his contemporaries, because Leibniz wanted to keep his work from the public eye. Moreover, instead of being scattered to the four winds, like so many other estates, this collection stayed intact because the House of Hanover impounded it after Leibniz’s death. It was thought that it might contain certain *Secreta domus*; Leibniz knew better than anybody else what went on at the courts of Hanover, Braunschweig–Wolfenbüttel, and even Berlin.

All this explains a further characteristic of his estate – namely, its volume: there are more than 15,000 letters to more than 1,100 addressees; and 50,000 treatises, sketches, and exposés covering 200,000 sheets and about 100 annotated volumes. Their content, too, is unusual. The papers cover a vast range of knowledge, including philosophy, mathematics and logic, jurisprudence, technology, geology, history, philology, and theology. They reflect his state of knowledge as well as the ingenuity of his scholarship, through wide-ranging scientific discussions spanning half a century. The same applies to its global perspective, with material ranging from a commentary upon the election of the Polish king, to a legal report on the Hanoverian electorate and the accession to the English throne; from papers on the reunification of the denominations, and the spiritual unity of Europe, to extensive material on China.

Owing to its range, Leibniz’s editors are faced with technical problems that can be solved only by interdisciplinary cooperation. In contrast to other literary estates, Leibniz’s texts – with their innumerable corrections and deletions – require deciphering, and therefore facility in difficult languages, together with an ability to follow mathematical and logical proofs. Only a minority of manuscripts are dated, which leads to dating problems. Moreover, not all the 2,500 watermarks on undated papers can be matched with clearly dated documents of the same mark. For this reason, the dating of documents requires a knowledge of names, working titles and their variations, and some insight into Leibniz’s metaphysics. Finally, there is a problem of selection. Leibniz tried to find a satisfactory answer to a problem by approaching it from different angles. The question is: Which of these have to be added as variants to the edition, and which can be left out?

Given this background, one can understand why producing an edition of Leibniz’s work has been so lengthy and so complex.