

From the Editor

CRISIS IN THE CLASSROOM
OR
CLIO DOWN BUT NOT OUT

Stephen John Kneeshaw
The School of the Ozarks
Editor, Teaching History

History is in a crisis of major proportions, or so we are told in the scholarly journals.¹ But perhaps, in the words of one noted practitioner, "there is no crisis in history; the crisis is among historians," because "history and history teaching is what we make it."² Without our getting into a semantic contest or assigning blame at this point, it can be argued that something is rotten in the historical profession. The saddening evidence of this undeniable fact involves individual historians, departments, elementary and secondary schools, community colleges, and colleges and universities.

History has been hit hard in the 1970s by declining enrollments, professional unemployment, and some popular questioning of the worth of history. A survey conducted by the American Historical Association in the spring of 1974, designed to study trends in history enrollment, indicated that enrollment in history courses had declined 12.16 per cent between 1971 and 1974 and that during that same period the number of students declaring history as a major had fallen 6.49 per cent. The figures did not vary measurably in public and private institutions nor in different sections of the country.³ Partially in response to these kinds of statistics, but in the face of other concerns too, employment opportunities for professional historians plummeted sharply. As enrollments declined, departments suffered through manpower cutbacks, and openings for the young holders of doctorates appeared in smaller numbers. The Employment Information Bulletin of the American Historical Association, in its issues for October and November of 1975, reported the availability of fewer teaching positions than for the same period in 1974.⁴ One doctoral candidate remarked acridly that historians out of work had "the employment prospects of chariot mechanics."⁵

Disconcerting, too, is the uneasy realization that history is not regarded as important by many in the general public. Richard Kirkendall, Executive Secretary of the Organization of American Historians, wrote recently that "confidence and interest in history is not nearly as widespread and strong among students, educational administrators, and politicians as they were only a few years ago." Society has strong doubts about the usefulness of history, Kirkendall continued, because history does not seem as relevant to the needs of this generation as it has in past times.⁶ The popular journals have picked up on the crisis in the past few months. Newsweek reported that Henry Ford's famous dictum that "history is bunk" may be "right," given the problems of the profession.⁷ In TV Guide, John P. Roche sadly noted that "the TV Generation" suffers from "historical illiteracy."⁸ Across the board, the crisis is announced. As professional historians, we need to ask why the problems have emerged, and to work toward a solution to our collective ills before we pull our house down around us.

Some reasons for the crisis seems simple enough to understand: the overall decline in college enrollment, the dropping of history from the required lists for graduation and teaching certification, the sharp decrease in job opportunities in history with an accompanying switch to the more "practical" fields of study.⁹ Yet, in spite of these very real facts, it is probable that the crisis could have been eased, at the very least, especially in regard to declining class numbers and public confidence, by an earlier understanding that history teaching has not been as good as it could have been, that even now it is not as good as it might be. In too many quarters teaching has been

taken for granted and often relegated to a place below research and writing in the scale of grading ourselves and our peers. Students complain about poor teaching, but their charges are written off generally as the "sour-grape" comments of those who do not know any better. Perhaps a sudden flurry of complaints near the close of a semester that classroom performances by teachers have become boring, uninspired and indifferent evokes a brief departmental meeting about the situation, but action seldom follows the discussion.¹⁰ And yet it is in the classroom where we can leave our most lasting mark. During the past year in commentary on classroom performance, both Gilbert C. Fite and Norman A. Graebner have cited Dexter Perkins' famous statements before the American Historical Association in 1956.¹¹ Perkins' comments remain valid:

We have tended . . . to exalt the written over the spoken word in the practice of our profession. Both carry their special messages, but for most of us the possibility of reaching large audiences through what we write is not great. Our best chance of making impact on others will come through the influence we can exert in the classroom, through the enthusiasms we kindle, through the interests we arouse, through the wisdom that history teaches and that we can strive to disseminate. Here, as I see it, for all but the greatest and most imaginative scholar, is our greatest chance of usefulness, our largest hope.¹²

If the historical profession is going to shake off charges that the trade in America is dominated by uncaring scholars and by "harlequins, hucksters, and hobbled persons" who substitute "circus ephemera" for the concern, enthusiasm and careful preparation that should be brought into the classroom, historians will have to do more than talk about the crisis and make half-hearted efforts to bring some small innovation to accompany their lectures written years ago on yellowing tablets.¹³

In response to the crisis in the classroom and throughout the profession, in January of 1974, the AHA Newsletter reported that plans had been made "to publish a continuing list of new approaches to teaching undergraduate history over the next few months."¹⁴ Accordingly, in March of 1974, the Newsletter offered a new section called "Teaching Experiments in Undergraduate History," and invited notice of "alternative methods of instruction . . . undertaken in the pursuit of improved historical learning."¹⁵ By September the effort had been retitled "Innovation in Undergraduate History," with space devoted to more lengthy descriptions of "innovations in teaching undergraduate history."¹⁶ January, 1975, brought word that another change had been effected: innovative courses would be detailed in "Teaching History Today," perhaps in recognition of the reality that hard times were upon historians at all levels, not merely in undergraduate institutions.¹⁷ Besides descriptions of courses and experiments, through 1975 the column evolved to include discussions of history in high schools, community colleges and state universities, commentary on the difficulties facing higher education, and "Observations on University Teaching and Research."¹⁸ These various efforts, in coordination with workshops and seminars sponsored by the AHA and the AHA Committee on Teaching, have publicized successfully a number of new approaches to teaching history and allowed for some historians to develop more meaningful techniques for their classrooms.

However, historians cannot rely totally on the American Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, and other learned societies to close off the crisis that troubles our worthy profession. Rather, as much as possible, we must rely on ourselves. As Richard Kirkendall put it, "solutions must be developed by individual historians working in their classrooms, libraries, and studies."¹⁹ Gilbert C. Fite, delivering his presidential

address to the Southern Historical Association in November of 1974, offered historians a formula to carry out such a program. History teaching can be "greatly improved," Fite contended, by guaranteeing teaching the important place it deserves in our schools, by bringing enthusiasm into our classrooms, by outlining our specific goals for ourselves and our students, and by offering courses for the students rather than for the faculty. Such a course of action, he concluded, will bring to the students and teachers "fewer boring experiences and more glorious ones."²⁰

More and more, during the past few months and years, historians have discovered that there is nothing wrong with history. Instead, "the crisis is among historians." As Pogo, the philosopher of the comics, remarked, "We have met the enemy and he is us!" In spite of the despair that many of our numbers feel, there is great hope for history and for historians too. History remains the best mechanism for civilizing this generation and those which are to follow. History still stands as an invaluable tool for understanding and coping with the troubles of an unsettled nation and world, and in its own way it is more relevant than the presentist fields which have attracted students in the past decade.²¹ And having recognized ourselves as the crisis-makers, perhaps we can resolve to alleviate and, in time, to end the crisis. Enthusiasm, determination, dedication and open-mindedness will be the best weapons in this greatest of struggles. Simply stated, if we accept the challenges and respond with the energy at hand, the past will have a great future.

NOTES

¹For example, see Richard S. Kirkendall, "The Status of History in the Schools," Journal of American History, LXII (September, 1975), 557-570. The AHA Newsletter has made repeated use of the word "crisis," as an adjective and noun. Interestingly, Gordon Wright, President of the American Historical Association in 1975, titled his one set of remarks in the Newsletter "Clio in Hard Times." AHA Newsletter, 13 (January, 1975), 2.

²Gilbert C. Fite, "The Historian as Teacher: Professional Challenge and Opportunity," Journal of Southern History, XLI (February, 1975), 4. Also see Philip R. Rulon, "The Social Ideas of American Historians," The Teacher Educator, II (Summer, 1975), 13.

³AHA Newsletter, 12 (September, 1974), 1.

⁴AHA Employment Information Bulletin, 5 (October, 1975), 1; ibid. (November, 1975), 1.

⁵David Sarasohn, "Zero Historian Growth," Harper's, 251 (July, 1975), 92.

⁶Kirkendall, "The Status of History in the Schools," 569. But Philip Rulon contends that "the general public . . . still seems to possess an affinity for history. It may be that modern man is psychologically unable to live in the present. Or it could be that the past serves as a 'security-blanket' in an age of social upheaval, for it is still more of a known quality than the future." Rulon, "The Social Ideas of American Historians," 13.

⁷"History as Bunk," Newsweek, 86 (November 10, 1975), 84-86.

⁸John P. Roche, "Does the TV Generation Lack a Sense of History?" TV Guide, 23 (November 15, 1975), A-3.

⁹Kirkendall, "The Status of History in the Schools," 568; Fite, "The Historian as Teacher," 6.

¹⁰As Professor Fite termed the situation, "There has probably been more talk about improved teaching and less done about it than almost anything else in higher education," and he concedes that some departments devote no time to the topic of teaching in meetings. Ibid., 3, 9.

¹¹Ibid., 4; Norman A. Graebner, "Observations on University Teaching and Research," AHA Newsletter, 13 (December, 1975), 5.

¹²Dexter Perkins, "We Shall Gladly Teach," American Historical Review, LXII (January, 1957), 293.

¹³Michael Lodwick and Thomas Fiehrer, "Undoing History; or, Clio Clobbered," AHA Newsletter, 13 (May/June, 1975), 4-5. Also see the rebuttals in the September, 1975, and November, 1975, issues of the Newsletter.

¹⁴AHA Newsletter, 12 (January, 1974), 1.

¹⁵Douglas Adler, comp., "Teaching Experiments in Undergraduate History," AHA Newsletter, 12 (March, 1974), 11-12. A second list of "experiments" appeared in the May/June, 1974, issue of the Newsletter, 15.

¹⁶Henry Bausum and Myron Marty, eds., "Innovations in Undergraduate History," AHA Newsletter, 12 (September, 1974), 3-4. The following three issues offered additional course descriptions.

¹⁷Henry Bausum and Myron Marty, eds., "Teaching History Today," AHA Newsletter, 13 (January, 1975), 4-5.

¹⁸AHA Newsletter, 13 (April, 1975), 5-6; ibid., (November, 1975), 5-6; Graebner, "Observations on University Teaching and Research," 5-7.

¹⁹Kirkendall, "The Status of History in the Schools," 570.

²⁰Fite, "The Historian as Teacher," 8-18.

²¹For example, see Rulon, "The Social Ideas of American Historians," 13.