PUBLIC HISTORIANS AND THE TEACHING OF HISTORY

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Public history is a field still new enough that any serious discussion of its merits and value must begin with a definition. Robert Kelley, who in 1975 founded the first training program in public history at the University of California at Santa Barbara, perceives it essentially as a problem-solving activity in which the historian serves a client. By contrast, he defines academic history as a field in which the historian is following his own interests in determining what needs to be studied. Recalling his own years as an expert witness in litigation involving floods and water rights in California's Sacramento Valley, Kelley explains how it was from that experience that he

> learned the power of the historical method. . . . Policy development and decision making are not abstract processes; they involve real people in real situations attempting to find solutions to complex problems. Historians are the kind of people who instinctively and unconsciously ask how these problems came to be. They are alive to the time dimension. . . . They are interested in origins--how things begin, how they grow, how they become what they are. This is a special perspective. And it was always fascinating to me that, in these cases, I was the only professional who had been concerned about these kinds of questions.[1]

In another context, Kelley elaborates this point:

> Public historians are at work whenever, in their professional capacity, they are part of the public process. An issue needs to be resolved, a policy must be formed, the use of a resource or the direction of an activity must be more effectively planned--and an historian is called upon to bring in the dimension of time: this is public history.[2]

Larry Tise, Director of the Division of Archives and History at the Department of Cultural Resources for the State of North Carolina, has noted that public history is commonly defined, even by those most actively engaged in its pursuit, from a negative perspective--as "history outside the academy, non-academic history, or the work of historians not engaged in the teaching of the discipline."[3] Not satisfied with this definition, which he sees as stemming from the well-known employment crisis that has plagued academic historians for more than a decade, Tise traces the roots of public history back to the early years of the twentieth century, with the emergence of the National Archives and the National Park Service. The early growth of opportunities for careers in museums, historical societies, and editorial projects was, in turn, followed by the Second World War, which brought a great increase of historians into the federal service. While this trend dissipated in the post-war period, it was followed by a "dramatic upsurge" in the late 1960s, with the passage of environmental legislation and the establishment of a multiplicity of federal granting programs affecting history, historic preservation, historical editing, and museums.[4]

According to one line of thinking, then, public history is not really new. This sentiment has been echoed by the current director of the American Association for State and Local History who, in a recent editorial to his members,

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wondered if "some of you who for years have been doing, in a historical society or museum or archives or historic site or government agency, something that is now being called 'public history' will resent the implication that it is anything new at all."[5]

If it is true that public history is not entirely new, it is also clear that there currently exists a substantial gulf within the historical profession between the field of public history and history teaching. I would argue, however, that this separation is unnecessary and imposes constraints on both public historians and history teachers that are unproductive for the profession as a whole.

A narrow definition of public history is in reality a reaction against an unnecessarily narrow definition of the historical profession that arose only within the last twenty-five years or so. There had been a time when a historian was simply a person who wrote history, and when the history that he wrote was read by the literate, if not the general, public. More recently, the profession of historian has come to be defined in a different way--and equated more or less with the role of college professor. This development was a natural outgrowth of the professionalization of the discipline that began in the late nineteenth century with the importation of the German seminar method into the American graduate school and was, in the beginning, a step forward for the profession.

Now, however, scholar/professors write largely for other scholar/professors and those who write the history that is widely read--best selling author Barbara Tuchman (The Guns of August, A Distant Mirror) comes immediately to mind--are dismissed as being not "professional" historians. In many instances, the antipathy is mutual. Tuchman, incidentally, thinks that not having earned a Ph.D. is what "saved" her. "If I had taken a doctoral degree, it would have stifled any writing capacity," she says. "People ask me, 'Do you teach?' I'm a writer. Why should I teach?"[6]

An important factor in defining the profession narrowly and relating it so exclusively to teaching was the great academic expansion of the late 1950s and 1960s, which provided seemingly limitless employment opportunities in that field. While the American Historical Association worried about how to train more professors at a faster rate, existing faculty realized an unprecedented opportunity to become more specialized and more expert in their own areas of research--simply by replicating themselves--as growing doctoral programs required additional seminars and provided larger numbers of graduate students. There was no planning for the enrollment declines that might have been predicted by a careful demographic analysis of the 1970s and beyond. As Bernadotte Schmitt wrote, in a 1964 pamphlet on history as a career:

> There is enough unexplored ground to keep the next generation of historians more than busy, and happily, the increase of college enrollments will provide jobs by which they may support themselves. If I were a young man looking for a professional career, I would ask for nothing better than to be an historian.[7]

Now, in the vastly different environment of the 1980s, senior academic scholars have come to doubt the future of the profession. "History hasn't social respect as an explainer of things anymore," complained J. H. Plumb, Master at Christ College, Cambridge, in a recent interview. "There's no sense of dimension, no sense of time anymore. It's been left out of things. Throughout the century, academic history has grown further and further away from explaining our problems."[8] With greater brevity and equal eloquence, American historian David Clary has summed up the problem quite nicely: "We have offered the world so little," he says, "that it has naturally concluded we have little to offer."[9]

Two forces are currently at work that have had and will continue to have an important impact on the field of public history. One is the employment crisis referred to earlier. Partly as a genuine effort to respond to a changing market, partly out of a sense of desperation or opportunism, many new public and applied history programs are springing up around the country. A 1978 survey turned up nearly fifty such programs and a second survey, published in the spring of 1980, includes an even larger number. These programs include preparation for such fields as archives, museums, historical editing, cultural resources management (including historic preservation), and applied research.[10]

The impact of the new programs is basically a hopeful sign, although fraught with dangers for the profession, for, if such programs are not carefully constructed and a new generation of historians is turned out ill-prepared for either traditional teaching jobs or new public history jobs, the entire profession stands to be discredited. A second development offers some comfort in the face of this threat, however, and this is the increasing tendency towards professionalism on the part of practicing public historians.

The year 1979 witnessed the development of a Society for History in the Federal Government, an organization concerned with, among other things, professional standards for government historians and the education of the general public and senior government officials to the contributions historical programs make. The National Council on Public History is essentially a steering committee to provide communications among new training programs, practicing public historians, and the public. It was created in April of 1979 at the first National Symposium on Public History. A second conference in April of 1980 was hosted by Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh. The Institute for Research in History was organized several years ago in New York City to provide an intellectual home for young historians forced to take jobs outside the academy; it and other groups are all now flourishing centers of scholarship activity.[11]

The Organization of American Historians in 1979 formed a committee to examine ways in which public historians might be more fully integrated into the organization and is currently exploring how the committee's recommendations--based on a survey from nearly 500 historians--can be implemented.[12] The new National Council on Public History, in cooperation with the American Historical Association, is currently planning a survey which is designed to create a national register of public historians.

It is my contention that both developments, the growth of new training programs as well as the increasing professionalism, will draw public history back more closely towards teaching--in the sense that a primary function of history can be to inform, to instruct, even if the audience of such instruction is not located in a traditional classroom.

Almost all of public history involves teaching at one level or another, in that the historian is aiding the "client" to be instructed by history. In the case of museum or park service education programs, the teaching role is often direct and obvious. A number of historical societies have begun the use of history-mobiles to bring information, exhibits, lectures, and other learning programs to people in a variety or new settings--hospitals, rural areas, or inner city communities. The nation's largest museum, the Smithsonian Institution, has developed an American Studies Office which even has a history course using the City of Washington as an artifact. Scholarly publications and regular visits from school groups, tours, and adult classes are now staples of the modern museum or historical society.[13]

It is not uncommon for the larger institutions to offer regular courses of study, much like any college or university. Chicago's Newberry Library

holds regular courses in community history and quantitative historical methods that are well known throughout the profession. The North Carolina Division of Archives and History now offers a masters degree program in conjunction with a consortium of higher education associations throughout the state.

Historians are found at work in other agencies of government besides museums. Some play the role of policy analysts, providing background information and advice about specific policy issues. In this, their function may be much like that of other social scientists, although the historian's special domain, the past, usually controls his special place within policy analysis which is educating the decision-makers on how things got to be rather than analyzing particular options or forecasting the future.[14]

Those engaged in the area of historic preservation might provide historical analysis as government officials, private consultants, or employees of non-profit, public interest groups. In the role of expert, assessing the impact of the present on the past or what remains of both the built and the less tangible, cultural environment, the historian rarely faces students in a classroom. This would also be true of the historians whose primary role is to write institutional history. For example, the Department of Energy, which has, among other projects, recently awarded a contract to an historical consulting firm for a history of the Three Mile Island disaster.

Similarly, historians in business seldom perform the more formal teaching functions. Many are archivists who provide regular advice and services on the conservation and maintenance of corporate records. One enterprising historical consulting company has undertaken to provide cultural orientation services for a large company transferring hundreds of employees to a new corporate headquarters. Teaching skills may also come into play in corporate training programs, which continue to grow in size and numbers. Businesses usually have an external relations unit which, while providing information used in decision-making, also interprets company policy to a variety of audiences. Wells Fargo Bank, with its rich history, is an excellent example of a business which has integrated a history department into a number of its areas of work.

These differences, while substantial, do not create an unbridgeable chasm. Certainly, the historian who has survived the graduate seminar process will not find the briefing session an unfamiliar experience. Those whose work takes them into legal research will find in the courtroom an environment not wholly different from the classroom.[15] If we could agree that the teaching function is not so foreign to the field of public history as one might initially suspect, it might be useful to consider ways in which the academic side of the profession has recently come to function in a more "public" manner.

Academic history was never so isolated from the mainstream of recent national events that it was not affected by such events as the civil rights movement, the war in Viet Nam, the second wave of feminism, or the research possibilities of computer technology. As graduate departments and professional associations expanded their horizons to diversify and specialize, a rich ferment of historical research was produced. New fields blossomed--family history, women's history, black history, demography, psycho-history, quantitative research, oral history, energy history, and now public history.

Sometime more than a decade ago, we can see the beginnings of change in the nation's attitude toward history. This revived interest in history manifested itself in the growth of the historic preservation movement as well as in environmental planning. Legislation mandating government oversight in these areas was passed by both the Congress and state legislatures. Membership in

local and county historical societies, as well as the National Trust for Historic Preservation, began to swell. Public documents and records, their retention, and matters of access and privacy, commanded serious national attention during the 1970s, leading to new legislation and litigation. "Roots," the television show that broke all the records in terms of size of viewing audience, symbolized a renewed interest in genealogy and family history.

Belatedly some academic historians and their institutions have seen the opportunities and have begun to take advantage of them. In cooperation with community groups and city government, the University of Baltimore has sponsored something known as the Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project, combining oral history research directed to senior citizens, creation of new curriculum materials for the secondary schools, written neighborhood histories, and a six-months traveling presentation. Faculty from the history department of the University of Louisville have played a major role in the preservation and use of archival material, rescuing valuable old municipal records from near destruction and providing for the preservation and ultimate use of records dating back more than 150 years from the Louisville & Nashville railroad.[16]

There still remain many important differences between public history and academic history, but I believe the pressures now facing the profession will work to narrow those differences in ways I have just described, rather than to widen them. The historical profession, reflecting profound changes in both its academic milieu and the society beyond, appears likely to continue the process of evolution already begun.

NOTES

[1]Robert Kelley, "Public History: What It Can Do For You," Public Works Historical Society Newsletter (December, 1979), 3.

[2]Robert Kelley, "Public History: Its Origins, Nature and Prospect," The Public Historian, I.

[3]Larry E. Tise, "History's New Challenge: A Case for Public Historians," History News, XXXIV (May, 1979), 122.

[4]Ibid.; Richard Hewlett, "The Practice of History in the Federal Government," The Public Historian, I.

[5]Jerry George, History News, XXXIV (May, 1979), 120.

[6]Nan Robertson, "Barbara Tuchman: A Loner at the Top of Her Field," New York Times (February 27, 1979).

[7]Bernadotte Schmitt, quoted in History as a Career, AHA pamphlet (Washington, D.C., 1964).

[8]John Walter, "A Historian's Concern: The Past is No Longer Mirror For the Present," The Washington Star (March 21, 1979).

[9]Dianne Martin, "History Goes Public," History News, XXXIV (May, 1979), 122.

[10]Arnita Jones, "Clio Confronts Adam Smith: A Survey of National Trends in the Adjustment of Training Programs for Historians," OAH Newsletter, VI (January, 1979, special supplement).

[11]"When Historians Organize," OAH Newsletter, VII (January, 1980). See also G. Wesley Johnson, Peter N. Stearns, and Joel A. Tarr, "Public History: A New Area of Teaching, Research and Employment," AHA Newsletter, XVIII (March, 1980), 8-10.

[12]Larry E. Tise, Carol Groneman, and Richard G. Hewlett, "Report and Recommendations of the Special Committee on Public History of the Organization of American Historians," November 7, 1979.

[13]Harold D. Langley, "Museums and the Historian," The Maryland Historian, X (Spring, 1979), 25-28.

[14]Edward D. Berkowitz, "The Historian as Policy Analyst: The Challenge of HEW," The Public Historian, I (Spring, 1979), 17-25.

[15]Unpublished transcript, panel session on historical consulting, American Historical Association Annual Meeting, December, 1979.

[16]Program Brochure, "Baltimore Neighborhood Project," University of Baltimore (1980).

[17]William J. Morrison, "Creating a Local Records and Community Archival Center: The Case of the University of Louisville," The Public Historian, I (Summer, 1979), 23-28.