

An Extended Editorial:

ON THE STATE OF OUR PROFESSION
HISTORY AND THE TEACHING OF HISTORY IN THE 1980S

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Every generation, every decade even, has its poets and balladeers to sound out the present and anticipate the days ahead. During the 1960s we enjoyed the poetic tones of Bob Dylan. Sadly, we historians did not hear his warning that "the times, they are a-changin'" and we did not realize that significant changes were "blowin' in the wind."¹ We gorged ourselves at the bountiful table of a Great Society; we were fat and happy in those days. We had all the money we wanted to buy books and hire faculty, and we had all the students we needed to fill our classrooms. But the times were changing rapidly, and we were blind to those changes all around us.

By the end of the 1960s the United States had turned away from the hopes of Kennedy's Camelot and the dreams of Johnson's Great Society. Our money and our blood were pouring out some ten thousand miles from home in a war that could not or would not be won. As the war in Vietnam reached back across the waters to touch us at home, our society and culture plunged into commotion and crisis. And history got dragged down with the rest.

The 1960s became an age of disillusionment for many of the American people. The younger generations openly voiced their disfavor with the age; they were quick to spearhead the civil rights and anti-war movements which revealed a growing disenchantment with the honored traditions of the American establishment and government.² The protestors were especially hard on historians who had been telling them about an American past which they rejected by their actions. Historians were too slow--if they moved at all--to defend themselves and their profession. Too many retreated to the safety of their library carrels and the isolation of their ivory towers. In a biting critique of "disinterested scholarship," "objectivity," and "neutrality," delivered at the start of the 1970s, historian Howard Zinn spoke the mind of the critics:

For a long time, the historian has been embarrassed by his own humanity. Touched by the sight of poverty, horrified by war, revolted by racism, indignant at the strangling of dissent, he has nevertheless tried his best to keep his tie straight, his voice unruffled, and his emotions to himself.³

No protestor in the streets could have said it any better. But by this time, historians had turned deaf as well as blind.

The events of the 1960s were not kind to history; the 1970s were to prove even harsher. The continuing horrors of Vietnam--made worse by the publication of the Pentagon Papers and the slow workings of Vietnamization--the national embarrassment of Watergate, and the rapid transition from plenty to scarcity in the economy, especially the shortage of energy, revived the crisis mentality of the previous decade. Distrust of the "custodians of power" and tightening of the economy intensified the problems of history in a society which professed to reject or deny its own past.⁴

An earlier version of this paper was delivered as the keynote address to the annual meeting of the Kentucky Association of Teachers of History, April 4, 1981, Shakertown at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky.

By 1975 it was sadly evident that the history profession had come upon some very bad times. Richard S. Kirkendall's famous report on "The Status of History in the Schools" simply reaffirmed what everyone had known for some time: ". . . history is in crisis," Kirkendall wrote, and "history's crisis is not merely a part of the large difficulties of academic life at the present time. History's crisis has proportions of its own."⁵

In 1976 Frank Freidel echoed Kirkendall by suggesting that "the historical profession is in a state of crisis."⁶ Other historians followed Freidel. David H. Donald, William H. McNeill, Stephen R. Graubard, and this author, among others, lamented that history had become "irrelevant," that history had lost its "centrality" on campuses, that history had suffered repudiation and grown rotten.⁷ Gordon Wright, while President of the American Historical Association, admitted that Clio had plummeted into "hard times."⁸

History's problems were traced to the general malaise and financial constraints affecting the entire academic world, to the student revolt against an "irrelevant" past, to the diminishing job market, to the pressure of changing demographic facts, and to the practicality of pursuing vocational courses of study.⁹ Much of this analysis placed the blame outside history itself. After all, history and historians could not be faulted for a decline in the number of traditional college-aged students. But there was more.

William H. McNeill of the University of Chicago laid out the case for the prosecution when he chastised his colleagues for over-specializing in their research and, consequently, for "post-holing" the curriculum in history departments.

The study of history cannot be expected to recover centrality in college curricula unless and until we have something to teach that speaks to the general concerns of ordinary citizens. Specialized "post-hole" courses in subjects of arcane professional debate will not do. . . . Better than any other discipline, history can define shared, public identities--national, civilizational, human, as well as local, ethnic, sectarian. For obvious practical reasons, college courses must concentrate at the introductory level on shared identities.¹⁰

McNeill foreshadowed David Donald's appeal in 1976 for a "relevant" history. The students of the 1970s needed more than just the facts of the past, Donald argued: "What undergraduates want from their history teachers is an understanding of how the American past relates to the present and future."¹¹

Speaking to the Southern Historical Association at the close of 1974, Gilbert C. Fite had more directly laid the guilt upon historians: ". . . there is no crisis in history," Fite contended, "the crisis is among historians. History and history teaching is what we make it." Fite applauded the "ferment" within some departments to improve the quality of teaching, but he feared that too few departments had "elevated" teaching to a position of prominence and that too many professors had lost their enthusiasm for the classroom.¹²

Some historians located the roots of the crisis within the context of American society. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese placed the crisis of history in "the broader cultural and political crisis" of the United States.¹³ In a provocative essay on the "pedagogy of the (less) oppressed," Ronald E. Butchart attested that this generation of college students was alienated:

This alienation is not simply an alienation from history courses (or English or philosophy or any other specific discipline); rather, they are profoundly alienated from knowledge in

its broad, critical, reflexive connotations, from love in its sense of community and connectedness, and, at base, from work in its intrinsically rewarding, socially reproductive meanings.¹⁴

This sense of alienation and oppression, suffered by an entire generation, turned a large segment of the American people away from their customs, traditions, and history, and helped create a "crisis" which continues to trouble our profession and our society in general.

So where do we place the blame? There is a bit of truth in all of these arguments. But I would suggest that history has eroded primarily because of social forces and economic crunches that we could not have controlled alone. Our greatest guilt lies in the slowness of our profession to respond to the crisis. Once movement began, a Dutch-boy syndrome set in. Historians stuck a lot of fingers in a lot of dikes, and occasionally shored up a wall or two. But the problems continued to build because too little attention was directed to the foundation which was beginning to erode and crumble.

Ironically, while academic history was suffering through some serious problems during the 1970s, on a popular level history seemed to be on the rise. Museums and historical societies reaped the harvest of the Bicentennial at mid-decade, which created a popular fever to learn more about the beginnings of the United States. For a few weeks in 1976 the American people put behind them recent memories of Vietnam and Watergate, and they reveled in the majesty of the "tall ships" and the glory that came with independence and nationhood.

Television quickly caught on to the national interest in history. During the Bicentennial year, PBS offered The Adams Chronicles, which became the basis for studying the colonial and early national years on many campuses.¹⁵ The next year brought Roots from ABC and Alex Haley. Roots generated the highest ratings of any television program in history and created a national mania to trace the roots and branches of family trees. Libraries with strong holdings in census and family-related materials--such as the Newberry Library in Chicago--reported that most of the readers and researchers after 1977 were interested in following the history of their families.¹⁶

Holocaust fired up attention in 1978 with a multi-part program to study the struggle and death of six million Jews in Nazi Germany. Then Roots: The Next Generations appeared in 1979, picking up on the successes of its predecessor. By the end of the 1970s and into the 1980s, the national television networks began to realize the potential of history on the small screen.

Some members of our profession were alert to the mood of the seventies. In many departments a prompt move toward "popular" history was made. Inevitably--and sadly--some departments were simply pandering to the crowds in hopes of saving budgets and jobs, with little thought given to preparation of these classroom efforts. But the great majority of departments planned their programs well, and some began to experience slight changes for the better in enrollment patterns.

By 1974 the American Historical Association was reacting too; the AHA established a Teaching Division, with its own vice-president, whose main contribution was the sponsorship of teaching conferences at various sites around the country. The National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History appeared in 1976 to promote job opportunities for historians other than teaching. New publications saw life in print, offering additional outlets for historians to share their successes and failures in the classroom. In mid-decade, the Society for History Education--publisher of The History Teacher--added a newsletter, Network News Exchange, and in 1976 Teaching History: A Journal of Methods began publication.¹⁷

Despite all of this ferment within the academy during the 1970s, problems continued to build as we moved into the 1980s. Graduate departments produced too many historians for too few teaching positions, and even the good work of the National Coordinating Committee and other interested groups was not enough to place every graduate in a history-related position. University and departmental budgets continued to shrink, if not in dollar figures at least in terms of inflated dollars. Some departments struggled with retrenchment and pressures for early retirement. Students continued to expand the enrollment in business, engineering, and professional fields, without similar moves toward history and the other liberal arts. History appeared to be no better off at the start of the new decade than it had been ten years earlier.

But there is hope for history, for us, in the 1980s. Most of our walls have come tumbling down, laying bare the hopes, fears, and frustrations of our profession. Now is the time to plan for recovery and revitalization. Now we can--we must--start to build history up again on the foundation that remains. History needs all of us; history needs our best efforts in the classroom and ideas for reform in and out of the classroom.

There are already some signs of improvement for history. In some colleges and universities, in some states even, history is being restored to a position of prominence (meaning required).¹⁸ We must not squander this second chance. As we have all been told at one time or another, history is never dull, but historians (or teachers of history) can be. Dull or uninspired teachers might have some place in academe, but their place should not be in history. At the secondary level, we should demand that history come from teachers who are historians rather than from coaches or from social scientists with little if any work in history.¹⁹ At the college and university levels, we should demand that introductory surveys, at least, be directed by historians who are teachers as well as scholars. Our best teachers with good ideas for their classrooms are our best hope for history.

The men and women to whom we entrust this work can promote the revitalization by making history "relevant" to this generation of students, by displaying how the past relates to the present and future, and by teaching something that--in the words of William McNeill--addresses "the general concerns of ordinary citizens."²⁰ The history we teach during the 1980s must be socialized. History must be more than wars and treaties and laws; it must be people, all the people. We can still study wars and treaties and laws, but our focus should be on the people who make them and the effect they have on the people of the states and nations. If we forget that history at its base is social--that it deals with people and the things people do--we will have lost sight of history's greatest gift, the gift of self-understanding, of knowing where we have been, where we are, and where we are going.

There should always be a place for traditional fields of history, for political, diplomatic, and economic history. But in the 1980s, perhaps as never before, we must make room for new programs too. Oral history, family history, and community history, to name only a few, offer lively ways for students to understand the process of history, and they demand that students break out of their traditional role of note-takers to become apprentice historians. By integrating into our traditional courses materials on "outsider" groups in our past--women, blacks, Indians, ethnic groups, workers--we can help students understand better the society into which they will be moving after college.

In colleges and universities with professional schools, another new sort of history can be offered. Very few professional programs have included a course in the history of the profession, whether it be law, nursing, or medicine, because no one seemed willing or qualified to teach it. Recently

administrators of professional programs have become eager to include specialized courses for their students when solid courses are proposed. On many campuses these courses have proven valuable in shoring up history enrollments and they have been beneficial for students in the professional program, who come to understand better the evolution and development of their chosen profession.²¹

In the 1980s we must break out of our isolation as individual historians by establishing lines of communications--networks--among departments and institutions. Grass roots organizations, such as the New England History Teachers Association, the Georgia Association of Historians, and the Kentucky Association of Teachers of History, have provided models which other states and regions should follow in this decade. As a good example, KATH has prospered because the teaching historians of Kentucky at all educational levels cared enough for each other to recognize common problems and then faithfully pursued a goal: ". . . to provide a common forum and source of information for all teachers of history in this state so that they may know one another's institutional activities, concerns and problems."²² Other states would be advised well to try the same.²³

These efforts at the state level should be duplicated--and enlarged--on a regional basis, with annual regional meetings providing the foundation for membership and meetings. For example, the Great Lakes History Conference and the Missouri Valley History Conference could provide the initiative in their regions, with other similar groups to follow their lead. Rather than offering miniature versions of the national meetings of the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians, these regional conferences should provide foremost forums for teaching historians to share their successes and failures with colleagues. Dialogue between teachers at these regional meetings could encourage a continuing exchange of ideas throughout the year and stimulate networking at both state and regional levels.

To remain fresh in the classroom and current in changing teaching methodologies, teaching historians should be encouraged to include in their regular reading one or more of the teaching journals, such as Teaching History, The History Teacher, and Social Education, among others. These are excellent publications, and they will continue to prosper if teaching historians will support them with subscriptions and with the submission of manuscripts and reviews. These sorts of journals merit our attention and our support, because they are offering what we require most at this time, ideas for the classroom.

Unfortunately much of the impact of these pedagogical journals is diluted by the refusal of the old-line scholarly journals to recognize that the "research" we are doing in our classrooms is just as important as the work we do in presidential libraries, national and regional archives, and newspaper morgues. As we enter the 1980s, the American Historical Review and the Journal of American History and the other "scholarly" journals continue their stubborn unwillingness to consider pedagogical materials, preferring instead to publish esoteric minutia on municipal baths in thirteenth-century Spain and the like.²⁴ In effect, they deny the importance of teaching and give the mistaken impression that our destiny as historians depends more--or solely--on the books we publish rather than on the many interests we foster and the impact we have in our classrooms. This attitude reflects clearly the views of the establishment forces which govern our profession.

The American Historical Association was founded in 1895 to represent the interests of historians in the United States. Somewhere during the years since then the AHA apparently decided that "historians" did not necessarily include "teaching historians," or so it would seem from the perspective of 1982. While history was beginning to stagger from the body blows of the 1960s, the AHA continued along its merry path, still picking up new members from the

lengthy rolls of graduate students and teachers. An occasional survey was conducted and quite a lot of rhetoric was bandied about, but except for a series of historiographical pamphlets (published through the Service Center for Teachers of History) no real action in support of the teaching of history was forthcoming.

As the job market all but disappeared at the start of the 1970s, the AHA stirred from its lethargy, still ever so slowly. The Employment Information Bulletin was started to tell us that there were fewer teaching jobs, which everyone knew already. The AHA Newsletter began to publish a column under various titles to discuss history in the classroom. Then, in 1974, the AHA Teaching Division was created to sponsor a number of regional conferences and encourage teaching sessions at the national conference. But the ELB could not undo the damage of previous years in the job market; teaching ideas were still denied space in the AHR which would have been available through libraries to more readers than the Newsletter; the regional conferences were only selectively effective; and the teaching sessions at the national conference traditionally were exiled to the noon hour rather than allowed to compete in prime time with the more "scholarly" sessions. On this distinction between teaching and research sessions, Warren Susman, Vice-President of the Teaching Division (1976-1979), remarked that it was "almost as if two different and often nonintersecting conventions were being held at the same time and in the same place."²⁵

This new decade looks to offer us much of the same. The AHA President for 1981, Bernard Bailyn of Harvard, followed in line with his predecessors, and like many of them he spoke for only some of us. In a published interview, Bailyn sorrowed that "history is no longer central, as it once was, to the study of people and their nations," which does address our needs. But then he continued that he was sorry to see good students taking "alternative" employment, because "that diminishes their potential for research."²⁶ I wish he could have added even a short line about teaching and the continuing crisis in the classroom rather than lamenting only the state of historical research.

The parochial character of the AHA and the limited version of its elected leadership convince me that history in the 1980s would benefit from "a people's revolution" within the Association. The time might never be better for teaching historians to wrest control of the AHA away from the establishment forces which have governed us into this crisis. Within the 14,000 or so members of the AHA can be found enough people who truly care about the state of history in the classroom to influence the outcome of the Association's annual electoral contests and to begin reshaping the AHA to benefit all historians at all educational levels and in the nonteaching sector of the profession.²⁷

Ironically, my call for this "people's revolution" comes after a careful reading of the 1976 Presidential Address of Richard B. Morris to the American Historical Association; in fact, I borrowed my descriptive phrase from his comments. Speaking of another time and another situation--but with ideas which reflect our current state in history--Morris described the success of the people in shaking and moving the American colonies away from British governance. Consider the relevance of his comments to our profession's crisis:

A people's revolution . . . brought new men to power, raised people's political aspirations, made the new governments of the Revolution more responsive to social inequities, and underpinned the notion of the sovereign people as the constituent power . . .²⁸

If we choose to take this giant step, we can bring to power new people with new ideas; we can reassert the sovereignty of "the people" within our profession; like in time of old, "we the people" can become the constituent power.

Now into the 1980s the problems of our profession appear sizeable but not insurmountable; after twenty years of evolution they quake deeply in the body politic of history. But these problems can be solved, if we start now, and if we are willing to marshal the tremendous potential within our colleagues and ourselves. If we have been good historians--if we have learned the hard lessons of our recent past--if the turmoil of twenty years has tempered us to withstand the inevitable pressures we still must face, then we can emerge from these hard times stronger and better than before. Otherwise, we will condemn ourselves to extinction and exile our students to that "wonderful world" which Art Garfunkel described in song:

Don't know nothin' 'bout the Middle Ages,
 Look at the pictures and I turn the pages;
 Don't know nothin' 'bout no Rise and Fall,
 Don't know nothin' 'bout nothin' at all . . .²⁹

That student of song "don't know nothin' 'bout history," but we do. We know much about what must be done in the 1980s to save history. We just have to commit ourselves to being better than we have been as a profession, and as individuals we have to commit ourselves to being the very best. Only then can we be certain that the past will have future.

NOTES

¹Blowin' in the Wind (Bob Dylan); The Times, They Are A-Changin' (Bob Dylan).

²The best recent study of the 1960s is Jim F. Heath, Decade of Disillusionment: The Kennedy-Johnson Years (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975).

³Howard Zinn, The Politics of History (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 8ff., 15. In another applicable comment, Zinn wrote that the historian is "bound--by professional commitment--to tally but not to vote, to touch but not to feel. Or to feel, but not to act. At most, to act after hours . . ." (1).

⁴See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "The Crisis of Our Culture and the Teaching of History," The History Teacher, XIII (November, 1979), 89-101.

⁵Richard S. Kirkendall, "The Status of History in the Schools," Journal of American History, LXII (September, 1975), 557-570.

⁶Frank Freidel, "American Historians: A Bicentennial Appraisal," Journal of American History, LXIII (June, 1976), 5.

⁷David Herbert Donald, "Our Irrelevant History," New York Times (September 8, 1977), 37; William H. McNeill, "History for Citizens," AHA Newsletter, XIV (March, 1976), 4-6; Stephen R. Graubard, AHA Newsletter, XIII (November, 1975), 5-6; Stephen John Kneeshaw, "Crisis in the Classroom, or Clío Down But Not Out," Teaching History, I (Spring, 1976), 2-5.

⁸Gordon Wright, "Clío in Hard Times," AHA Newsletter, XIII (January, 1975), 2.

⁹Hazel Whitman Hertzberg, "The Teaching of History," in Michael Kammen, editor, The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 474-504.

¹⁰McNeill, "History for Citizens," 4.

¹¹Donald, "Our Irrelevant History," 37.

¹²Gilbert C. Fite, "The Historian as Teacher: Professional Challenge and Opportunity," Journal of Southern History, XLI (February, 1975), 3-18.

¹³Fox-Genovese, "The Crisis of Our Culture and the Teaching of History," 89.

¹⁴Ronald E. Butchart, "Pedagogy of the (Less) Oppressed: Second Thoughts on the Crisis in History Teaching," Teaching History, IV (Spring, 1979), 3-9. See also the exchange between John Anthony Scott and Butchart which followed Butchart's essay, 10-12.

¹⁵For one example of this practice, see Richard M. Rollins, "'The Adams Chronicles' and the American History Survey," Teaching History, II (Fall, 1977), 54-57.

¹⁶Conversation between the author and Richard H. Brown, Director of Research and Publication, Newberry Library, August, 1979.

¹⁷For the origins of Teaching History, see Teaching History, I (Spring, 1976), 1.

¹⁸According to the Kirkendall report of 1975, several states kept their requirements in history despite a downturn nationally. Report on "The Status of History in the Schools," passim. Another example has Indiana requiring elementary teachers to add a course on world cultures in the twentieth century. See Robert F. Byrnes, "Organizing a New Course on the World in the Twentieth Century: The Agony and the Ecstasy," Teaching History, V (Spring, 1980), 52. To cite one specific college, revised general education requirements at The School of the Ozarks, adopted for 1979-1981, and continuing thereafter, include three hours in American history and three hours in World Civilization, neither of which was required under earlier general education programs.

¹⁹According to a recent report on the teaching of history in Iowa, "institutions which prepare history teachers place little emphasis on a history major as preparation for teaching history." The report also indicated that coaching and teaching history still go hand-in-hand in many areas. A majority of superintendents commented that "the necessity of filling coaching positions sometimes results in the appointment of history and social studies teachers who are less competent in their subject area than non-coaching candidates for the same position; furthermore, these superintendents think that such situations occur frequently." "Profile of the Iowa High School History Teacher" (Part III of "The Teaching of History in the Public High Schools of Iowa"), Network News Exchange, VI (Fall, 1980), 17-23.

²⁰McNeill, "History for Citizens," 4.

²¹At St. Louis University a history of law course has been added to the curriculum. See T. Michael Ruddy, "A History of Law Course: The Merger of Career-Oriented and Value-Oriented Historical Study," Teaching History, VI (Spring, 1981), 15-20. Thomas More College in Kentucky offers a course on the history of nursing. See Raymond G. Hebert, "History of Nursing: History and Historical Methods for Pre-Professionals," unpublished paper presented at the American Historical Association/Georgia Association of Historians Conference on the Teaching of History, Marietta, Georgia, May, 1980. And at Creighton University medical school, students are provided several elective short-courses in the history of medicine.

- ²² The story of the Kentucky Association of Teachers of History is told in Raymond G. Hebert, "Promoting History Through State Associations: The First Year at KATH," Network News Exchange, IV (Spring, 1979), 4-6, and Raymond G. Hebert, "Promoting History Through State Associations: Phase I for KATH, 1977-1981," unpublished paper presented at the Missouri Valley History Conference, Omaha, Nebraska, March, 1981.
- ²³ Teachers in Iowa have expressed "the need for an organization of teachers of history in Iowa." "Profile of the Iowa High School History Teacher," 23.
- ²⁴ Perhaps a change for the better is coming. In a recent letter to history department leaders, the new Executive Director of the AHA asked for input on introductory surveys preliminary to one of the teaching sessions at the 1981 AHA meetings. Then he promised that "The American Historical Review will feature an article on the history and development of the western civilization course and a panel critique on that course in its spring [1982] issue." Samuel R. Gammon to Stephen Kneeshaw, November 13, 1981.
- ²⁵ Warren I. Susman, "Annual Report, Vice-President, Teaching Division," Reports of the Vice Presidents, 1978 (Washington, D.C., 1978), 13. The Organization of American Historians must share the guilt on this charge. During the 1981 OAH meetings in Detroit the luncheon meeting of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations on April 3, 1981, conflicted with two teaching workshops in diplomatic history. The 1981 AHA meetings did break the tradition of noon hour teaching sessions and workshops. Although relatively few teaching sessions were offered, they were scheduled opposite research-oriented sessions throughout the convention.
- ²⁶ Chronicle of Higher Education (July 7, 1980), 3.
- ²⁷ A recent AHA Newsletter displayed clearly the problems we are facing with our leadership. During the 1979 meeting of the AHA in New York, the business meeting considered a resolution from the Professional Division "to examine employment opportunities for historians generally." In part the resolution read:
- . . . Whereas, the American Historical Association, the one organization aspiring to embrace all branches of our discipline, seeks to meet the needs of its wide and diverse membership, therefore, be it
- RESOLVED, that the Council, officers, staff, publications, and activities of the association shall reflect the variety of intellectual interests and professional concerns of its whole membership . . . (Emphasis added)
- An amended version--not affecting this section--brought a tie vote from the floor. John Hope Franklin, AHA President in 1979, promptly "cast his ballot against resolution and the resolution failed." Franklin opposed an effort--from within the leadership ranks no less--to make the AHA "reflect the variety of intellectual interests and professional concerns of its whole membership." AHA Newsletter, XVIII (September, 1980), 15. Ironically, the "Teaching History Today" column did not appear in that issue of the Newsletter because of "space limitations." Ibid., 12.
- ²⁸ Richard B. Morris, "'We the People of the United States': The Bicentennial of a People's Revolution," American Historical Review, LXXXII (February, 1977), 1-19.
- ²⁹ (What a Wonderful World (S. Cooke, H. Alpert, and L. Adler).