

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE STATE OF HISTORY, 1976-1986

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"History is in a crisis of major proportions." That sobering thought opened the first issue of Teaching History ten years ago, when I wrote about "the crisis in the classroom."¹ During this past decade countless historians have addressed this crisis, reflecting on the state of history and suggesting ways to combat the crisis.² We still face some difficult times, and occasionally still hear a distressing comment (for example, that fewer and fewer students select history as a college major), but history remains alive and vital. To draw again from that first issue of Teaching History, history is "down but not out."

We still hear occasionally the voice of Cassandra and predictions of doom for history. For example, writing in the New York Times Magazine late in 1985, Diane Ravitch discussed the "Decline and Fall of Teaching History." Looking at high schools, she lamented that history had been absorbed into the "social studies" and diluted by "curricular fads." Discussions with college students showed her that young Americans are ignorant of significant people even in the American past (her examples were Jane Addams and W.E.B. Du Bois) and of major events (e.g. Brown versus Board of Education decision of 1954). And for the general population, she suggested that "there is cause for concern about many Americans' sense of history."³ Ravitch told her tale well, and there is something to what she wrote. But there are other signs that history is stirring again, and that our crisis is not as critical as it was ten years ago.

Eric Rothschild, who teaches at Scarsdale High School in New York, sees another side--with some positive points--to the high school situation. Granting that "things have not changed dramatically," Rothschild sees "fewer 'one damn thing after another' teachers" in high schools and more teachers who are approaching their teaching in innovative ways. New York Regents have increased from three to four the required number of social studies courses. He notes, too, that he sees more young people turning toward high school teaching, including the teaching of history, than in previous years. This latter fact is crucial, he admits, because of the "graying" of history teaching staffs at many schools.⁴

Reflecting the state of history at many colleges and universities, at Emporia State University in Kansas--as one example out of many--history is enjoying a "resurgence," according to Loren Pennington.⁵ Changes in general education requirements have brought history back into the mainstream. College faculty and administrations have begun to recognize that history is at the base of every field and that some grounding in history is essential to a truly liberal education. At some institutions the American survey remains the staple course, although the trend now is to emphasize World Civilization (or occasionally Western Civilization).⁶

Teaching History was born in the mid 1970s to address this crisis in the profession and to open eyes to new approaches to history in the classroom. And there are others who share in this important task, including The History Teacher and Network News Exchange from the Society for History Education, Social Studies and Social Education (both with a secondary school emphasis), and from Canada The History and Social Science Teacher. A new journal entry is the Magazine of History from the Organization of American Historians, with a projected audience of junior and senior high school history teachers. These journals have made a significant impact on the

teaching of history during this past decade, and they will remain important to history teachers at all academic levels as we continue to make our profession better and stronger.

This past decade has seen some movement by major professional associations to help solve the problems of our profession. But, in general, there has been more talk than action. We can applaud the efforts of the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians, in concert with the National Council for the Social Studies, to promote collaborative programs to improve the teaching of history. But in the years ahead there needs to be more--more sessions that focus on teaching at national meetings of AHA and OAH, more AHA and OAH-supported writing on teaching than merely a column or two in Perspectives from AHA or the Magazine of History from OAH, and more of a commitment from our elected leaders and committees to the improvement of the teaching of history.

As we move closer to a new decade, it appears more than ever that we need "a people's revolution" within the ranks of the professional associations, that we need to put into place a leadership that is chosen not on the basis of years of service and numbers of books published, but on a genuine commitment to the teaching component of our profession.⁷ Dexter Perkins said it thirty years ago in his presidential message to the AHA:

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.⁸

Perkins's message should be required reading for the men and women who stand for election in the AHA and OAH, certainly in the committees that emphasize teaching and the place of history in the schools.

In order to expand this commentary on "the state of history," I asked several people associated with Teaching History to share their reflections on the profession over the decade 1976-1986. Following you will read three sets of remarks, each addressing the needs of a different type of institution. We hope that these comments give you some ideas to consider and maybe some incentive to act.

ON THE STATE OF HISTORY: COMMUNITY COLLEGES

William Mugleston
Mountain View College

For a ten-year retrospect on the state of history from the perspective of a two-year community college: We are now dealing with a generation of high school graduates who are absolutely the most poorly prepared I've seen in eighteen years of college teaching. We are reaping the fruits of a generation of neglect of education in this country. To say students are

deficient in history is only half the story. They are deficient in everything--writing, reading, comprehension, math, geography, general knowledge of their own government, public affairs, you name it. They lack the absolute basic skills that will allow them to succeed in most courses.

Given the difficult problems this country will face as the 21st century approaches and the interrelatedness of the world (and coupled with this the narrow provinciality if not downright xenophobia of some of our students), where are our leaders of the future coming from? I hope they're out there somewhere.

I'm sure my views are skewed because I teach at an open-door community college where we attract the most poorly prepared students. Yet what is frightening is that colleagues in four-year colleges have little to tell me that is any more heartening. During this past fall I attended the Southern Historical Association meeting in Houston. While there I was trading horror stories with two old friends, one at Tulane and the other at Southeast Missouri State. It's no different with them.

Are we better off now than ten years ago? Yes, I am, personally and professionally--I would hope that over a ten-year haul we all are. Is the profession better off--no, I doubt it. My first reaction is grief for the talented young Ph.Ds I see hitting the job market these days. After enough fruitless job hunting, some of them are going to say "to hell with history" and do something else. Secondly, history is still viewed as a "throw-away" subject in many high schools; just ask your students how many were "taught" history by the coach. Finally, most of our national leaders, if they have any sense of the past, keep it well hidden (Ronald Reagan being the leader of the pack here).

Not to be exclusively on the down side, I do think things will get better with our students, although it may take up to a decade. There appears to be on the national horizon something of a stirring about the inadequacies of public education. Here in Texas, the Perot Commission has made some tough, long-overdue proposals to get the high schools back to academics and to dethrone football. The state legislature has bought many of these ideas. "No pass, no play" really IS being enforced, although the coaches are incensed over it. Incidentally, higher education in Texas is now about to be studied also. I for one welcome it.

So what do we do? Keep on plugging, I guess. At times all that keeps me going is the belief that some, a few of my students are going to be helped by what we're doing. Sometimes the payoff is several years down the road and we never know it. Once in a while one of them comes back and says thanks, and that is the ultimate reward.

ON THE STATE OF HISTORY: FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES

Thomas Armstrong
Georgia College

With regard to the state of history, it seems that some of the sense of malaise and frustration that was expressed in the middle 1970s is gone. This might be that the social and intellectual climate is much more tame than it was. More likely, it is the combination of several factors related

to the job market. For example, the supply of professors now more nearly equals the demand. Other factors are by-products of this, including the relative immobility of history faculty and the relative absence of new blood in most history departments. Our department at Georgia College is fully tenured and our last opening was six years ago.

Given the stabilization of the profession in recent years, we must guard against petrification. Secure in tenure track positions, teaching faculty must work all the harder to maintain expertise at the cutting edge of their chosen fields and subfields, and at the same time present fresh material to their classes. This must be done without the internal compulsion of a new voice or new blood in many departments and must, in addition, be done without appreciable additions to library holdings in many schools with declining or status quo library budgets.

One way to avoid fossilization will be to encourage the exchange of faculty. The exchanges might be summer exchanges with universities inviting scholars from teaching institutions to teach their summer sessions, while allowing those instructors access to the better libraries; the exchanges might be within a college or university system, allowing faculty from junior colleges to teach at senior institutions and to help in the supervision of theses or dissertations. This would allow those faculty to get more actively involved but also to rub shoulders with their research-minded colleagues. The Georgia Association of Historians is initiating an exchange effort of this sort.

The exchange of faculty is one way to avoid a hardening of the profession. Another is to actively recruit majors, students, community support, etc. For too long the profession has glibly assumed that the community will come to us when the need for the professional historian arises. However, that need does not arise because too many individuals consider themselves their own best historians. The credentials for "historian" are too ill-defined outside of academia and, as a result, we as professionals find ourselves limited to academia. To counter this, we must involve ourselves actively in the world of community history, whether it be the local historical society, preservation organizations, or the varied efforts to teach more meaningful "heritage" classes in the public schools. As a profession, we must reach out actively to these groups to assure that history is being given appropriate direction and also to assure continued interest in the subject.

Survival of the profession also requires interdisciplinary communication. We as historians know that all other disciplines can benefit from an understanding of their own past. We must, however, convey that to the unconverted. We can do this at our professional meetings through cooperative sessions with librarians, archivists, other social scientists or humanists, etc. The degree to which this can be done is the degree to which we enrich our own meetings but also enrich our understanding of history.

ON THE STATE OF HISTORY: STATE UNIVERSITIES

Shannon Doyle
University of Houston-Downtown

Perhaps I am merely growing old and grumpy, but I see change in the discipline and in the students. The discipline seems to grow narrow, resulting in (for me) unintelligible sessions at conferences and books that are deadly dull. I do not want to know about the career of an obscure postal official in Bavaria in 1902-1907. I resent being presented with such information when I thought I would learn something significant about Germany before World War I.

I can remember a session at the American Historical Association when Clark Clifford discussed the Truman administration's recognition of Israel, and another when George Kennan discussed Richard Pipes's Russia Under the Old Regime with Pipes present to respond. Those meetings were worth attending. But there seem to be too few of them any more.

There seems to have been an alarming narrowing of specializations and an incredible multiplication of professional organizations to accommodate them. No one seems to have a primary field in Modern Europe or Tudor-Stuart England. I think that the fragmentation has resulted in monographs that are unread because they are unreadable, and in textbooks that are dreadful. As each new trendy specialization comes along, it gets put in with everything else, and authors make little attempt to offer evaluations of all of this stuff. The experiences of a black army cook in Alabama in 1917 might well be interesting, but they are simply not as important as the experiences of Woodrow Wilson.

I am not sure why this has happened, but it is doing history no good at all. Generalists are quite clearly out. There seems to be little interest in constructing a broad context in which to understand the isolated, little bits of information that seem to fascinate my colleagues. Few are writing history for a broad, public audience. Even fewer worry about writing interesting, clear English prose.

Students are changing as well, at least in the cities. We have created a huge class of semi-literate people with unrealistic expectations. At least eighty percent of my students are business majors who expect a starting salary of forty thousand dollars. They want the degree (which few achieve) to earn money. They see little relationship between the course information and the acquisition of a good job. They will sit in class (sometimes), but they will not learn. Students tell me all the time that they did not read an assignment because they did not want to. When I point out the relationship between the refusal to do assignments and a failing course grade, I only get blank looks. I have great sympathy for those who cannot do the work because their reading and writing skills are poor. I try to get these students to enroll in our remedial programs. But I have no idea what to do with those who can do the work and simply will not. I see more and more of these students each semester.

I have noticed a real decline in the numbers of students who can reason logically, see cause and effect relationships, and anticipate the consequences of actions. History can teach these skills, but not to people who refuse to learn. I think that this attitude of refusal is new, and it is frightening.

Having expressed horror at the trend history is taking of ignoring the main roads in favor of the footpaths, and confusion about student attitudes, may I note that I still love teaching history. My classroom is still my work. I can trudge down the main roads, trying to make sense out of the past. There are always enough good students who come along, ask questions, and arrive at interesting insights. It is always fun--always interesting. But overall the changes in the past ten years have not been good ones.

Now that you have heard from us, we would invite you readers to share your thoughts and impressions about the state of history and the changes (good and bad) that you have seen in the classroom and in the profession over the past decade.

Is Diane Ravitch correct in her estimates that history is in the throes of "decline and fall"? Are we still in a state of crisis in 1986? In the classroom? In the professional associations? Are we facing a generation of historical illiterates? Is there anything we can do about it?

Or has history undergone "resurgence" at your high school or college or university? Has the "crisis in the classroom" passed? Does the past have a future? What can we do to insure that the future of history will be good?

NOTES

¹Stephen Kneeshaw, "Crisis in the Classroom, or Clio Down But Not Out," Teaching History, I (Spring, 1976), 2.

²For example, William H. McNeill, "History for Citizens," AHA Newsletter, XIV (March, 1976), 4-6; David Herbert Donald, "Our Irrelevant History," New York Times, September 8, 1977; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "The Crisis of Our Culture and the Teaching of History," History Teacher, XIII (November, 1979), 89-101; Michael Kammen, editor, The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1980); Stephen Kneeshaw, "On the State of Our Profession: History and the Teaching of History in the 1980s," Teaching History, VII (Spring, 1982), 3-11.

³Diane Ravitch, "Decline and Fall of History Teaching," New York Times Magazine, November 17, 1985, 50, 52, 54, 56, 101, 117.

⁴Eric Rothschild to Stephen Kneeshaw, January 19, 1986.

⁵Loren Pennington to Stephen Kneeshaw, January 14, 1986.

⁶See Bullitt Lowry, editor, "World Civilization and Western Civilization: A Symposium on Papers by Gordon Mork, Bullitt Lowry, and Shannon Doyle," Teaching History, X (Fall, 1985), 51-62.

⁷On this call for "a people's revolution" within the ranks of historians, see Kneeshaw, "On the State of Our Profession," 8.

⁸Dexter Perkins, "We Shall Gladly Teach," American Historical Review, LXII (January, 1957), 293.