Trouble Is My Business: A Private View of "Public" History

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THE STORY YOU ARE ABOUT TO READ IS TRUE. Only the names have been deleted to protect the innocent.

About four years ago, an industry in Louisiana sought to purchase some land for plant expansion. To finance the venture, the company requested a government-guaranteed loan, application for which required, of course, approval by appropriate bureaucrats. The company's lawyer filled out and submitted all the required forms, including an abstract of title for the land back to the year 1803. In due course, the government reviewed the application and abstract, and sent back the following letter in reply:

> We received today your letter, enclosing application for your client and supported by abstract of title. We have observed, however, that you have not traced the title previous to 1803, and before final approval, it will be necessary that the title be traced previously to that year.

The attorney offered the following response to the government:

> Gentlemen: Your letter regarding the title received. I note that you wish the title to be claimed further than I have done it. I was unaware that any educated man failed to know that Louisiana was purchased from France in 1803. The title of the land was acquired by France by right of conquest from Spain. The land came into possession of Spain in 1492, by right of discovery by an Italian sailor, named Christopher Columbus. The good queen took the precaution of securing the blessing of the Pope of Rome upon Columbus' voyage before she sold her jewels to help him. Now the Pope is the emissary of Jesus Christ, Son of God. And God made the world. Therefore, I believe it is safe to assume that He also made the part of the U.S. called Louisiana and I hope to hell you're satisfied.[1]

That story, and others like it, illustrate the social pertinence of something that has recently acquired the cachet "public history," the employment—or more commonly, the unemployment—of the materials and methods of history in the ordinary activities of life.

Although the role of history has been well established in business and government for generations, the very idea that history has a place in public affairs seems a shockingly new one to most of the academic historians who have dominated the discipline in recent decades. Only a few of them are comfortable with it. But for those few, the concept offers

[1] I found this story in the February 1978 issue of *R-9 Contact,* the house organ of the U.S. Forest Service's Eastern Regional Office in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which reproduced it from an unspecified issue of *Loggin' Times,* a trade publication of the southern timber industry.

much hope for salvation from the declining fortunes of academe. Programs in "public history"—the latest "fill-in-the-blank studies" fad of the academic historians—are springing up everywhere. By promising careers in government and industry for graduates, the sponsors of many public history programs seek to increase student enrollments and thereby insure their own continued academic employment.

Well, just what is this thing called public history, and why do I say such cynical things about it?

Let us look first at the language. I am personally intrigued by the implications of the very term, "public history." When I hear it, I ask myself whether it has an opposite number: "private history." Perhaps it does, for over the last couple of generations history has come to be the private property of historians, most of them professors, who share its secrets among themselves and turn unmercifully upon any of their fellows who seeks to offer works of history to the wider, general audience. However, the accepted label for such historians, who define themselves in exclusively academic terms, is "academic," not "private."

But if there is a "public" history, surely there must be a "private" version. Perhaps the distinction might follow that exemplified in other professions, such as that of the detective. The undercover police officer is a public investigator, whereas the employee of Pinkerton's, or the independent sleuth, is a private investigator. The distinction follows for a number of other trades, and it turns universally upon whether the practitioner is employed by an agency of government. Following such a formula, then, I used to be a "public" historian—during my career as a federal civil servant. But since I have become an independent consultant, I must now be a "private" historian.

Somehow or other, that does not taste right. Maybe the problem is, when abbreviated to "Private Aitch," it will not flow over the tongue with the suggestive fluidity of "Private Eye." It is therefore unlikely that my kind will find memorialists of the caliber of Arthur Conan-Doyle or Dashiell Hammett, or see our activities portrayed on the screen by the next Basil Rathbone or Humphrey Bogart.

It should come as no surprise that virtually all of us so recently branded by academics as "public" historians find the term offensive. It offers little improvement over previous insults like "nonacademic" and "nontraditional," which reflect more about the attitudes of academics than about what we do. As any victim of group prejudice can attest, glib categorizations are not improved by changes in the labels.

We regard ourselves as *professional* historians, following the distinctions made by doctors, lawyers, engineers, and virtually all other professions. Professionals are people with certain qualifications, who put their knowledge and skills to practical use in the real world. Those of their colleagues who remain sheltered in the universities, teaching students and chasing knowledge for its own sake wholly apart from material purpose, are "academics." They may be professional educators, but within the larger spheres of their own disciplines they remain academics.

An examination of the semantics of something like "public history" is instructive, for it tells us much about what is really going on. And what is going on in this instance is part of the decline of the American higher education establishment into utter effeteness—which the dictionary tells us is the state of being "no longer able to produce; worn out; spent and sterile."[2]

No discipline so epitomizes the waning moral fortunes of academe as does history. During the steady growth of the educational structure in the time of the GI Bill and the baby boom, history withdrew into the safe womb of the universities. One by one, the academic historians abandoned their links with the non-historian elements of society, sev-

[2] *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* (Nashville: Southwestern Company, 1972), s.v. *effete.*

ering even their connections to the instruction of history teachers in the elementary and secondary schools, and ultimately—through acquiescence in the termination of basic course requirements—virtually all students except history majors. History departments had one purpose: the instruction of history majors, who would become history graduate students, who universally would join the history departments as history professors. Outside the classroom, the history professor was expected to publish works whose acknowledged audience would be history professors. With others, he was to have no truck.

For the last thirty years or so, the life cycle of academic historians reads like that of bacteria. But anyone who has observed a petri dish knows that even bacteria can replicate themselves only so long. Eventually, they will overrun the available space and sustenance, new offspring will choke the community, and the whole lot will fall into decay. Only those bacteria that leave the dish to establish themselves elsewhere will prosper. If the dish is covered, even that is impossible.

In the case of the academic historians, the cover on the university dish was self-imposed. When the limits of the available space and sustenance were reached, the inevitable decline set in. One day, the baby boom ended, and the academic historians awoke to find themselves in a "job crisis," as their surplus offspring threatened to choke the whole community.

There was much wringing of hands and many cries of "Oh, cruel world!" By the early 1970s, some of the professors began to take action—the only kind they knew. They went to their conferences and passed stirring resolutions that *something* must be done about the job crisis. Of course, that meant that something must be done by someone else, for there could be no error in the ways of the professors. Besides, most of them had the security of tenure, and were not personally threatened if their students could not find work.

But no one else did something, and the job crisis did not end. Instead, it became more serious because, as student enrollments in history departments declined faster than those in other departments, the security even of the tenured was at last threatened. The sins of the fathers, formerly visited only upon the sons, were beginning to strike home. In casting about for rescue, some of the more imaginative professors looked to an unlikely group of saviors.

Although the academics had long liked to believe that all historians were professors, many of them were vaguely aware of a group of people who came from "out there," who despite the fact that they were not professors called themselves historians anyway. But they were an odd breed, and accordingly suspect. In the spirit of charity, they were allowed membership in the historical organizations, and even attendance at the conferences. But they lacked the attributes of civilization that would fit them to hold office or even to review books for the journals. They dressed differently, and they worked in alien lands among savage peoples. So, much as the effete Greeks termed their more vigorous neighbors "barbarians," the academic historians dismissed their strange visitors as "non-academics," denizens of "nontraditional" or "alternative" worlds.

But a few of the professors observed that history's barbarians were unaffected by the "job crisis." Perhaps the strangers could point the way to rescue; perhaps the overcrowding of the academic petri dish could be eased by colonizing some of the offspring in foreign lands. How could the barbarians object? They would, after all, enjoy the civilizing influence of the transplanted children of the academic homeland.

Eyeing the prosperous happiness (read: "regular paychecks") of the barbarian historians, some of the professors in the mid-1970s cried, as did Shakespeare's Miranda, "O, wonder! How many goodly creatures are there here! How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, That hath such people in't!"[3] They asked the barbarians to welcome their students, and give them employment.

[3] *The Tempest,* Act V. Scene I.

So a few professors sent their offspring into the alien lands. But, alas, too many of the wayfarers proved unprepared for life in the wilderness. Not even the efforts of charitable barbarian historians could save them, and they fell prey to lions, or violated the customs of the country and were turned away.

Some of the barbarians told the small number of professors who would listen that they desired the support of colonists from the universities, for their own numbers were small while their tasks were great. But first, they told the academics, you must prepare your students for survival in the wilderness, and fit them with the skills they need to earn their livings. Most of all, you must prepare them to adopt the customs of the country, and erase their prejudices against us and our ways of life. You must cease calling us "nonacademic," for our habits are more virtuous than yours; "nontraditional," for our civilization is older; "alternative," for our way of life is of our own choosing, and more surely rewarding than the starvation that awaits you; because we are *historians,* just as you call yourselves, but we bring more of the light of history to the world than you have ever done.

The more perceptive of the history professors harkened to the warnings of the barbarians, and resolved to change their ways. We shall do as you say, they vowed. We shall institute *coursework* that prepares our students for success in your alien lands, and you will be pleased and welcome them to your numbers.

Wonderful, replied the barbarians. We shall help you. We shall send missionaries to work among you, and lead your students on the virtuous path.

But the professors declined that offer, perhaps fearing to let barbarians within their walls. *We* shall undertake the instruction, they said; and we shall become more cognizant of your sensibilities. We shall call you "public historians," and you will be pleased. Then they returned to their universities and sealed the doors.

The professors were true to their word. In the last three years, graduate programs in "public history" have proliferated, and their offspring are approaching the barbarian world once more. And once again, I predict, many of them will be eaten by lions, or will offend the customs of the country and be turned away.

That is a very serious indictment, I realize (not to mention that it is also the end of a long chain of elaborate metaphors[4]). It is not one that I should lay wholesale upon the entire academic community, for there are some notably good programs in "public history" at a number of universities. Although each has a number of shortcomings, they share certain elements in common that distinguish them from the chaff and offer some hope for their students. The most important is that they do not see themselves as offering an "alternative" to the academic mainstream, but rather seek honestly to prepare their students for careers in the real world. Another is that they feature some degree of interchange with the professional elements of the historical community, including instruction or visitations from established professionals and internships or on-the-job training for students. And the best programs are interdisciplinary, recognizing that a good education cannot be limited to the history department alone.

But even the best programs have weaknesses, I believe. Among them is the fact that they constitute rather elaborate mechanisms to counter the effects of the mainstream academic attitudes that are the real source of graduate unemployability—for it is unemployability, not unemployment, that is the root of the "job crisis." A graduate of a regular history program ought to be able to begin a successful career in the real world, if he has the ambition and imagination to pursue a clearly defined goal, and is free of the professorial snobbery that holds the world's work in low repute.[5] Another weakness of the better

[4] I suppose that I really ought to be ashamed of myself for that excess, but I am not.

[5] I have beaten the academic dead-horse repeatedly on the issue of unemployability for several years. For examples, see the tandem articles, "Write When You Find Work: Advice for Graduate Faculty on Training Employable Historians," and "An Afterword—Earning a Living in History:

programs, I believe, is their tendency to replace substantive coursework with technical instruction in specific career skills better acquired on the job.

But against the honest reform of attitudes that the good "public history" programs represent, those complaints are comparatively minor. Not so with the vast majority of their counterparts. The greatest number of the new history programs, I assert, are little more than cynical attempts to inflate enrollments by enticing students with vague promises of immediate and profitable employment after graduation.

I came to that condemnation by examining the several surveys that have been made of the new programs, and by reviewing some of their own promotional statements. Most of the "public history" programs have a number of weaknesses in common. The most crippling is their assumption that blind pigs make effective guide dogs. The faculty of the typical "public history" program is merely the regular departmental faculty, people with no experience in the practical subjects they presume to teach. Worse, the majority of the programs have made no effort to promote an interchange between the professional and academic communities; they have consulted no professionals, and do not involve them or real-world experience in the education of the students. Nor do they communicate with other departments of the university.

Compounding those sins is the inanity of many of the courses. Somehow, "public history" programs delude students into believing that they can enter at the journeyman level into areas like historic preservation or business administration or archival management—large, complex fields with considerable histories of their own and demanding qualifications for their practitioners—with one or two aimless seminars under ignorant professors, and no practical experience.

Despite the proliferation of "public history" programs, I cannot agree that the academic historians have as a group acknowledged or corrected the errors that caused their own "job crisis." Careers in historic preservation, museum services, archival management, and the like are real things requiring real determination and preparation. Yet, the major programs in those three subjects at leading universities operate utterly without participation from the history departments—some of which have "public history" programs that presume to qualify their students in those very areas. In addition, the isolation of academics in "public history" programs tends to match their general isolation from the rest of the university, and the world. At one of the most estimable universities, for instance, the history department presumes to teach graduate students how to enter and prosper in business administration. It makes no contact, however, with that same university's school of business, which is the most prestigious in the nation.

Such programs are likely to ensnare only the most ignorant students, or those who see real-world employment as a distasteful but unavoidable alternative to professorship. Students intending to follow careers in historic preservation or archives or other areas would be well advised to seek out schools offering good programs in those areas, few of which are based in history departments. It is especially regrettable, however, that they will probably not get the instruction in history that they ought to receive in preparing for such careers.

What does all this mean in the short run for us "barbarians" of history (for that is what most readers of this journal are)? It is most likely that we shall receive a growing number of job applications from "public history" graduates who believe themselves prepared to show us how our work should be done. They will, unfortunately, be no more qualified than their desperate predecessors of a few years ago. On the other hand, we shall still see historians willing and able to enter our fields at the apprentice level, as did we, and some

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Advice for the Unemployed (or Unemployable) Historian," *The History Teacher* 12, no. 1 (November 1978): 65–85; and "Historic Preservation and Environmental Protection: The Role of the Historian," *The Public Historian* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1978): 61–75.

of them may emerge from "public history" courses. Their qualifications and ambitions, however, will more often be native than the results of instruction.

In the long run, we must assert our own professionalism and take steps to make the academics clean up their act if they hope to have their students join us in regular numbers. In the private and public sectors, history is an area of professional practice in archival management, editing, business and civil administration, administrative history, historical agency management, social and natural sciences research, planning, historic preservation, public education, museum operation, and many others. The professional associations in those several activities need to tighten and promulgate their basic qualifications standards, and inform the academic community of its ethical duty to prepare students to meet those standards. And that community must do its part, if it can ever get its nose out of a book and take the measure of the world.

There are some hopeful signs. A National Council on Public History has been formed, one of its stated objectives being the promulgation of creditable standards for "public history" programs. The American Association for State and Local History has appointed a committee to do the same, and others are taking shape in the areas of historic preservation and archival management education. Whatever their effect on the academic history community, their findings ought at least to help students desiring real-world careers in history to sort the wheat from the chaff as they shop among universities.

There is also some small cause for optimism in the history discipline itself. Within the last year, three of the four major historical organizations have nominated or elected professional historians to office, and have looked tentatively toward some sort of organizational reform that recognizes the realities of the world, especially the shortened patience of the professional historians within their membership. Whether any real changes will come about is difficult to predict. Certainly, past records give little cause for optimism. For example, when I proposed before the business meeting of the Organization of American Historians, in 1979, that we needed, among other things, a code of ethics for the profession, the very mention of such a thing nearly caused a riot among the academics present. The gulf between the effete and the barbarian remains wide.

Perhaps there will prove to be no hope of reforming the academic community. In that case, we shall see the formation of responsible and truly professional organizations of historians, under whose influence the better "public history" programs may evolve into a professional education system that grows as the old academic mainstream withers.

Personally, I should find that unfortunate, not least because it would further the compartmentalization of the American intellectual elite. But we barbarians in the public and private sectors have for too long remained scattered, isolated, and totally unsupported by our own colleagues. Given the absence of our own "special interest" in the real political world, we and our missions are suffering.

Historic preservation, the largest responsibility of the National Park Service, receives its lowest priority, and in management Service historians have been reduced almost to invisibility. In the broader national picture, history is being progressively removed from historic preservation, and at this moment various forces are combining to wrack the form and substance of the national historic preservation program; historians and their interests are the surest losers. In the National Archives and Records Service, the voice of history is outshouted by those inimical to its interests, as the archival mission is subordinated to records management. In land management, nearly the entire perspective on historic preservation is endowed by archeologists, for there are few historians present to speak for the environment's historical component. Around the country, exhibits in historical museums are the province of imaginative designers, with varying insurance that the historical story will be told correctly. And the history depicted on Hollywood's film reflects very little awareness of fact.

But I cannot conclude on an utterly gloomy note, for I do not believe that the cause is hopeless. If I did, I should not be a part of it. I believe that professional historians will

band together, and that they will have one or more professional organizations to support them in all their areas of occupation. Whether these will come from existing historical organizations or from new ones is of little importance. They will come.

Nor is the picture within the historical profession totally dismal. Although it is not likely that a large percentage of tenured professors will change their ways, the same is not true of their students. The attention we barbarians have received even in the academic world is having a positive effect.

Although we still receive applications from desperate losers who regard our careers as unfortunate alternatives to academe, we see a growing proportion from the more vigorous types from whom we have always drawn our recruits. The sorry prospects of the declining academic world have discouraged enrollments from among the shrinking violets who look to history as a hiding place from the demands of the real world. In their places are young people who desire, as did we, careers in the public or private sectors, and who see history as a possible means to that end. The total number of graduates is down, but it is no longer comprised almost exclusively of people who believe that the only honorable aim of a history education is professorship. But the caliber of young historians is still a matter of individual character, with or without the benefits of a course of study in "public history."

As the historical process reasserts itself in the worlds of business and government, managers of archives, libraries, and other documentary collections will feel the effects. They will notice changes in their patrons. Previously, historians entered the archives to pursue scholarship for its own sake. Their topics were of their own choosing, and their aims were their own. The materials they wished to examine were of limited range, most of them textual.

But the historian in the hire of others searches the archives for specific answers to specific questions, usually to meet someone else's needs. He has no time for the leisurely pursuit of facts whose sole appeal is that they interest him. And the types of materials he examines are more varied, for they provide information that the academic might regard as "antiquarian" or unrelated to a scholarly thesis.

Inevitably, the changing complexion of the archivist's clientele will affect his own activities. Services to users will vary, and document retention decisions will be modified. Best of all, the archivist will find himself acknowledged increasingly as a colleague in public life, and not just a servant of the user.

And among the archivist's new patrons, a growing share will be people like me, independent operators serving the interests of paying clients. As history resumes its wide role in the world of work, people and organizations will inevitably seek out the services of consulting historians who can meet their needs.

As a historian, I have had two careers, the second of which is still young. Nothing reflects the naive conceptions of the academics responsible for the worst of the "public history" programs more than the difference between their ideas of the historian's role in the real world and the reality of my own experience. I have been forced down in an airplane in a howling Alaska williwaw, and almost went to the bottom of Lake Superior in a storm-wracked boat. I have had encounters with armed men, and on occasion went armed myself. More often, the tools of my trade have included a hard hat and a wrecking bar. More often yet, I have argued far from the library with politicians and my fellow bureaucrats over matters of law, policy, and budget. I have directed sizable staffs, and have worked alone, in libraries and in historic buildings. I have been a researcher, but mainly I have been a bureaucrat, a manager, a formulator of policy and an enforcer of the law.

Forsaking the world of the Civil Service, I entered upon professional service to clients. People come to me because of a number of activities I can perform, information I can provide, recommendations I can offer. Some clients come to me because they have difficult problems requiring careful solution. The academic works for publication; often I work in deliberate confidence, respecting the desires of my clients. I expect the same of my staff.

To be sure, there are many careers for the historian in the public or private sector that have little physical adventure; my experience is certainly atypical. But all of us "barbarians" do inhabit a land far different from the predictable safety of the university. We are responsible to a great number of other people, to the historical and social interests we serve, to those who pay our wages, and to the ethics of professionalism. There must be a purpose to what we do.

What we do could not be further removed from the life of the academic, who answers chiefly to his own scholarly interests. Whatever becomes of the many "public history" programs, good and bad, it is probably safe to say that they will continue to be directed by people who chose to be history professors at least in part to avoid confronting the troubles of the real world surrounding the campus.

But for us barbarians, life on these mean streets is a ceaseless adventure. Far from avoiding trouble, each of us can say with Raymond Chandler's stolid detective, Philip Marlowe, "Trouble? Trouble is my business."[6]

[6] "Trouble Is My Business" is the title, and recurrent fragment of dialogue, of an early Chandler short-story, first published in pulp in the 1930s. It was republished in two Chandler anthologies, *The Simple Art of Murder* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1950); and the paperback, *Trouble Is My Business* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972).

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